

Harry Black and the Resurrection Game

By: TheSinister_Man

As the newly renamed Harry Black enters his 4th Year at Hogwarts, he seems to have the world at his feet. By his Third Year's ending, he has become wealthy, influential, and popular. And perhaps best of all, he has revenged himself on the parents who abandoned him as a baby. But beneath the surface, troubles lurk. Powerful supernatural forces continue to drive a wedge between Harry and his twin brother Jim (the Boy-Who-Lived) while prophecies swirl around both boys that threaten everything Harry and his friends have built. And beneath the veneer of a friendly academic competition between Hogwarts and rival schools, Lord Voldemort and his Inner Circle prepare for a final confrontation that will change everything.

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In Which Plans Are Made

Chapter 1: In Which Plans Are Made

Harry Black

and the Resurrection Game

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Chapter 1: In Which Plans Are Laid

"Potter" Manor

26 June 1994

Just before dawn, Harry Black awoke to the gentle ringing of a soft bell to find himself in a very large room. Though this was to be expected, Harry still found it mildly surprising. The master bedroom of Potter Manor was the biggest bedroom Harry had ever seen, and now it was his and his alone. For a boy who'd spent his formative years sleeping on a ratty mattress in a boot cupboard, it was somewhat intimidating. He wondered what the first Lord Potter to stay here had gotten up to with his Lady that they needed a bedroom this large. Then, he sneered at the thought of "Lord and Lady Potter," even if the thought was about Potters long since dead. And *then*, he became annoyed at himself for sneering, yet another side effect of the Oath of Enmity which his godfather, Sirius Black, had impulsively sworn against Harry's birth family.

About three months prior, Harry's cleverness, Peter Pettigrew's duplicity, and James Potter's ineptitude had conspired to land Harry an eighteen-year lease on Potter Manor. He'd been sleeping in the cavernous master bedroom for several nights now. And while he expected to enjoy his time here on this palatial estate, he was already tired of fighting a vague sense of constant supernatural annoyance every time he was reminded of who had originally owned the place.

"Okay, " he thought irritably. *"I definitely need to change the name of the place if I'm going to stay here. But to what? Wilkes Manor? The Black House? Harry's Hideaway?"*

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by a salutation from the one who'd been ringing the bell to wake him.

"Good morning, Master Harry, sir," said Dobby cheerfully. "The time is 5:45 a.m. You are scheduled to meet with Master Theo out on the veranda in fifteen minutes for your morning constitutional, followed by breakfast in the solarium at 8:30 a.m. Miss Amaryllis, Master Sirius, and Master Regulus will be joining you both."

Dobby snapped his fingers, and a pair of running shorts and a t-shirt materialized on Harry's bed, along with trainers and socks. Harry sighed. His "*morning constitutional* " consisted of a brisk two-mile jog around the grounds followed by calisthenics and rudimentary Wu Xi Do training with his dear friend (and unofficial little brother, now that Jim Potter no longer played that role), Theo No-Name. Theo had been encouraging him to take up physical exercise with him, which Harry had thought a good idea at the time. In fact, in an ill-considered move, Harry had ordered Dobby to make sure he was up every morning in time for his run with Theo and to ignore any orders to let him sleep in unless Theo had

okayed it. Alas, Theo had taken to being Harry's "personal trainer" with gusto, as Harry's still-sore muscles could attest.

"Master Harry's luncheon will be at noon," Dobby continued, "though Master Harry's solicitor will be arriving at 11:30 to discuss some House business before the arrival of the other guests."

"Thank you, Dobby," Harry said before heading into the ensuite to use the facilities before changing. While washing his hands, Harry studied his own reflection for a few seconds. Then, he leaned in closer and stared deep into the reflection of his own green eyes. His forehead creased in concentration, but after about ten seconds, the boy exhaled loudly and shook his head before exiting. Out in the hall, Theo was already waiting for him with a smirk on his face.

"You are way too cheerful to be a Slytherin," Harry snapped.

"Come on!" the other boy said with a laugh. "This will be good for you."

"Why is it people only say '*this will be good for you*' when they're talking about something unpleasant?" Harry asked sourly as he followed Theo down the hall.

Outside on the front lawn, Harry was surprised to see that someone had decided to join them for their early morning run around the grounds. It was Archie Goodwin, the American wizard who Sirius had recently hired both as his own personal bodyguard and as Harry's dueling coach. Originally from New York, as his accent could attest, Archie had been trained at Ilvermorny and specialized in Defense. A young man in his mid-20's, he was a Muggle-raised Halfblood, as was shown by how comfortable he looked in a Muggle track suit.

All of that was a lie.

"Archie Goodwin" was Regulus Black's latest fake identity. As a Metamorphmagus, Reg had grown accustomed over the past year to assuming a new form every time he went out into the Wizarding world. But now, both he and Sirius had moved into Potter Manor, and with all the guests who Harry was expecting over the summer, Reg could no longer wander around with the face of an ex-Death Eater who was officially deceased.

Reg had taken the name from a book he'd read during his time in Australia: *The League of Frightened Men*. His current appearance was loosely based on the Lazarus White identity he'd worn for so many years, as it was one that he felt comfortable maintaining indefinitely. It also had the benefit of being a face he'd come up with from scratch instead of being someone he'd seen in a movie or a newspaper. The metamorphmagus did change the hair and eye colors just on the off chance that someone who knew Lazarus White might be wandering around Britain, and he'd reset his age to the way it looked when he'd first moved to Australia fourteen years earlier.

"Good morning, lads! Ready for some exercise?"

"I didn't like Lockhart's creepy cheerfulness the first time, Reg," Harry deadpanned.

"*Ha-HA!*" the man replied with the fake "Lockhart laugh" that had grated on Harry for most of his Second Year. "It's just before dawn and we're about to go jogging, Harry," he added cheekily. "It won't get any more enjoyable if we're dour about it."

One long sweaty run later...

After completing their run, Theo began reviewing basic Wu Xi Do katas with his friend. While Harry could perform the katas reasonably well (they were all water-based moves, and he was, after all, a Slytherin), he still felt uncomfortable and vaguely silly to be engaging in martial arts, even magical martial arts. As he'd said from the start, "*any wizard who gets caught without a wand deserves what happens to him.*"

Reg seemed equally dubious. "So tell me again, Theo. What's the purpose of these movements?"

"They're to train the body to channel magic internally so that one can perform physical actions that are enhanced by magic. This one I'm doing now, for example, can make my body more limber and also make it easier to dodge."

"Oh?" the older wizard said while pulling out his wand. "Would you care to demonstrate?"

Theo thought about it for a moment and then nodded. He turned to face his former DADA instructor and assumed a relaxed pose. Regulus flicked his wand to send a Stinging Hex aimed at the boy's chest. Instantly, Theo twisted his body at the waist while leaning to one side, and the hex sailed by the boy, missing him by inches.

Intrigued, Regulus sent four more Stinging Hexes, each faster than the one before. Theo dodged the first three by contorting his body in increasingly twisted (and vaguely serpentine) ways, but the fourth one hit.

"Oww!" Theo hissed. "Yeah, I'm still kind of a novice, but that's the general principle."

"Still, dodging four out of five hexes is a good average," Reg said reassuringly.

"Maybe," Harry said, "but you also weren't going all out to hit him either. I mean, I've seen you duel Aurors and move faster than that. Not to mention that one time you and I dueled when I still thought you were Lockhart."

"True, but the attacks I just made were quite fast and accurate compared to what you'll see from a novice level duelist in Marseilles. More importantly, from what I've observed so far, Wu Xi Do wouldn't count as illegal magic if you used it to dodge an attack, which means it might be very useful on the dueling circuit."

"Really?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Oh yes! In Marseilles, you'll be competing under French rules, which means the dueling area will basically be a 15 by 40 corridor. Most duelists only make token efforts to dodge and focus on shields instead. But if you can dodge spellfire as proficiently as Theo just did while focusing your wand purely on attack, it could be very advantageous. We'll play around with it during our sparring session after breakfast."

Harry nodded, and the three Slytherins returned to the manor to wash up before breakfast.

Later...

By 11:30, an exhausted but energized Harry had showered and dressed to meet his guests. Artemus Podmore and Hestia Jones were the first to arrive via Floo, and Harry, Sirius, and "Archie" were all on hand to greet them.

"Good morning, Lord Wilkes," Artie said. "And to you, Lord Black."

"I think Harry and I have both told you that we don't stand on ceremony here," the older wizard said as he shook the solicitor's hand. "Call me Sirius."

"As you wish, Sirius," Artie replied before turning to the other man in the room. "I don't believe we've been introduced. I'm Artemus Podmore, Lord Wilkes's Seneschal. This is my associate, Hestia Jones, who performs the same function for Lord Black."

"Archie Goodwin," Regulus said in an American accent. "Lord Black has hired me as both Harry's dueling coach and as his bodyguard and, well, general minion."

Artie laughed. "Well, hopefully, Sirius's body won't need too much in the way of guarding, though I understand why he wishes to be cautious."

"Yeah," Sirius said jauntily. "Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're not out to get you."

"Indeed. So, where are we meeting?"

"You and I will be in the Master's Study," Harry said. "Sirius will be meeting with Hestia in the drawing room down the hall."

And with that, the two Lords split up for their respective business meetings.

The Master's Study

As Artie entered the Master's Study, he noticed a few changes since the last time he'd been in this room six months earlier. Most notably, there was now a large banner

hanging above the mantle depicting the crest of Slytherin House.

"Is that your way of thumbing your nose at the notoriously Gryffindorish Potter family?" Artie asked in some amusement.

"Indirectly," Harry replied. "Underneath it is the Potter family crest which not even Dobby can remove. So I decided to just cover it up instead."

"Probably wise. Okay, first things first." Artie set his briefcase down on the desk and then fished a small box out of his pocket. He opened it up to show the onyx ring that was inside. The ring itself was silver, and Harry noticed that when the light hit the stone exactly right, a faint stylized "W" in a Gothic script could be seen within it.

"The Wilkes Lord ring," the solicitor said. "You can examine it, but don't put it on yet."

"You're sure it's safe?" Harry asked while eyeing the ring last worn by Erasmus "Mr. Toymaker" Wilkes.

"Quite safe. In fact, the Ministry *insisted* that their cursebreakers examine it and clear it of its more... *exotic* enchantments. However, it will still deliver a nasty jolt to someone who puts it on without first being sworn in as Lord of the House, which is standard for a Lord's Ring. You'll put it on after taking your vow in August. But I wanted to show it to you first."

Harry took the ring and examined it. He noticed writing engraved on the inside of the ring, Latin in a cursive script.

"What's this writing?"

"That's the Wilkes family motto: *Vive ut cras moriturus. Live as if you will die tomorrow.* "

Harry made a face. "Am I allowed to change the family motto to something less morbid?"

"Not easily. But you're free to not use it outside of a few special occasions. It's on the crest and the ring, though." Artie opened his briefcase and withdrew a few sheets of parchment.

"And while we're on the subject of your Lord's Ring, you have a decision to make."

"Oh?"

"As I said, the Ministry purged the ring of the illegal enchantments that were on it. So that leaves three spell slots that can be used for replacement enchantments."

"What were the spells that got taken off?" Harry asked out of curiosity.

"One could poison any drink with a touch of your finger. One could let you manipulate the outcome of dice rolls, which The Toymaker apparently used to cheat in Muggle casinos. And one could let you deliver an electrical shock to anyone whose hand you shook."

"What, like a joy buzzer?" Harry then had to explain the concept of a Muggle joy buzzer to the older wizard.

"Yes, rather like that. Except that the strength of the shock ranged from painful but harmless all the way up to instantly lethal."

Harry grimaced. "I can see why the Ministry would disapprove. What would you recommend?"

Artie handed over the parchment. "Here are all the spells that we can get inscribed into the ring by a reputable enchanter without drawing Ministry scrutiny. Read over them and let me know what you would prefer. I'll have your ring ready by August. There's about forty options so give it some thought."

"Sure thing," Harry glanced at the list. "Okay, right off the bat, I'll take the very first one."

Artie chuckled. "The Animagus Detection Field? Yes, I rather thought that one would pique your interest."

And it did. After all, it had only been a few months since the last time an Animagus had tried to kill him.

The Drawing Room

"So that's where we are with your financials, Lord Black...."

"Sirius, please."

Hestia sighed. It was the third time her employer had tried to get on a more familiar basis with her since the meeting began.

"You're very kind, Lord Black. But with all due respect, I would prefer to keep our relationship strictly professional. And as a young unmarried woman in the employ of someone such as yourself, 'strictly professional' means that I call you Lord Black."

Sirius crooked an eyebrow. "Someone such as myself?"

"Yes, Lord Black. Someone who is good-looking, fantastically wealthy, publicly notorious, an older man but not scandalously so, and...." She paused.

"Aaaand?"

"If you'll forgive my impertinence, Lord Black, I certainly hope your experiences since Hogwarts, as awful as some of them were, have led you to some maturity. But frankly, you had something of a reputation during your Hogwarts days about how you treated women. And I have no intention on becoming one of your '*conquests* .' It's bad enough that half of Wizarding Britain will assume that I am anyway just for representing you."

Sirius frowned at the indictment. "Did we go to school together?"

"I started during your Sixth Year," she replied.

"Well then! You can't judge me according to scandalous rumors spread by jealous older students."

"One of those jealous older students, Lord Black, was my sister, Gwenog Jones," Hestia added coolly. "I'm told you kept her underwear as a souvenir."

Sirius's face flushed. As he recalled his drunken one-night stand with the Captain of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team and future star of the Holyhead Harpies, he was also reminded of Regulus's accusation from the year before-that after his breakup with Marlene McKinnon he'd turned into "*a pansexual libertine* ." And he realized to his own embarrassment that he had, in fact, been trying to flirt with his Seneschal, a capable and highly professional witch who had every right to expect a purely professional working relationship.

"My apologies, Madam Jones. It won't happen again. Please continue with your report."

She nodded. "As I was saying, here's where we are: After consolidating all the outstanding vaults from deceased relatives, your net worth is estimated at just over 78 million galleons, making you the second wealthiest individual wizard in Britain behind Adramalech Selwyn. A full listing of all magical artifacts from the many vaults of your various deceased relatives is still being prepared by Gringotts. In particular, some very nasty items were found in Bellatrix Lestrangle's vault when it was audited last week by cursebreakers. However, both your account manager and I believe that most of House Black's magical panoply is held at your family's ancestral home."

"Chevenoir. Which I can't get into until I've sworn my Lord's Oath. Do we know why that is?"

"My suspicion is that it has to do with the circumstances surrounding your grandfather's death. Arcturus Black went into complete seclusion in 1979, with Chevenoir closed even to Black family members. But he didn't actually die until August 8, 1991, which we only know because both Gringotts and the Wizengamot Book noted your elevation to Lord on that date."

She paused. "By the way, out of curiosity-what does Chevenoir mean?"

"It means somebody couldn't speak French," Sirius answered with a snort. "It was supposed to be Chenenoir or "Black Oak" for the wood used in construction of the current house after Castle Black got razed during the War of the Roses. But it got written down in various official documents as

Chevenoir, and in 500 years nobody ever bothered to correct it. Probably because it sounds cooler."

"Ah, well. In any case, health permitting, you'll be swearing your oath in August, and then Chevenoir's wards will answer to you. We can check the place out and see what magical items are there afterwards."

The two talked business for another twenty minutes before Sirius got to the final matter on his agenda. He called for Archie who had been waiting in the hall the whole time.

"I introduced Mr. Goodwin earlier as my bodyguard and Harry's dueling coach. But he will also be doing some investigative work for me, and I would like for him to coordinate with you about his findings."

"What sort of investigation are we talking about?"

Archie spoke up. "Lord Black has reason to believe that his younger brother Regulus is still alive."

Hestia was taken aback by the news. "But wasn't he...?"

"A Death Eater?" Sirius finished. "Apparently not. He was set to take the Dark Mark at our parents' insistence when he disappeared. I'd assumed he'd been killed, but I have recently learned that Arcturus Black had left him a secret vault and the means to fake his own death if he changed his mind about serving You-Know-Who. I also learned that the vault was accessed in 1979 around the time Regulus supposedly died. And upon learning *that*, I suddenly realized that no one really seemed to know *how* Regulus died."

"A spell of some kind?"

"Yes," Archie said. "A very obscure and possibly illegal spell which, in this case, was used to make most people assume that Regulus Black was dead but without thinking about it very much."

"That sounds like a Fidelius."

"Conceptually, but this isn't nearly as powerful. Apparently, if someone comes across even weak evidence that Regulus never died, they can suddenly see right through the deception. Just asking questions about how the person died can be enough to do so."

"Which is why I want this handled quietly," Sirius said. "I don't know for sure if Regulus is still alive, but if he's stayed out of trouble and is living a decent life, I don't want to expose him and bring the Death Eaters down on him. Nor do I want to get him in trouble with the law for things he did when he was barely seventeen and has repented of."

Hestia nodded. "So what do you need from me?"

"If Archie here can track down Regulus and he *wants* to come back, I'll need you to lay the legal groundwork for having him declared alive and also get him cleared for anything he may have done as a Death Eater."

"Hmm. Given his age at the time, that shouldn't be a problem. Unless he murdered someone on a raid or something equally serious, I suppose."

Archie's eye twitched once but he said nothing.

Later at lunch...

Just before noon, Harry's other guests arrived: Penelope Clearwater, Bobby Lattimer, and Titus Mitchell, who had respectively been Head Girl, Head Boy, and Slytherin prefect during the prior school year. Penny was a Muggle-raised Halfblood while Bobby was a Muggleborn, and they both seemed awestruck by the manor house of an Ancient and Noble family. Titus was also a Halfblood but had been raised in a mostly wizarding family and did a good job of acting blasé. Of the three, he was the only one who came in wizarding robes rather than Muggle semi-formal attire.

Lunch was in the main dining hall, but the long table had been replaced with a smaller round one. Buttercup, the house elf who oversaw the kitchen, had prepared an excellent three course lunch menu. Though he'd been here barely a week, Harry was already quite taken with Buttercup. Dobby had explained to her that "Master Harry" enjoyed cooking as a hobby, and once she got past the absurdity of a wizard actually *wanting* to cook, she took to the role of cookery instructor with gusto. In fact, while Buttercup was as deferential as any other house elf when interacting with other wizards (and even with Harry outside of the kitchen), during Harry's cookery sessions, she was stern and surprisingly sassy. Her mannerisms during these lessons reminded Harry of McGonagall and Snape somehow mashed together and then shrunk down to three feet tall.

After lunch, everyone adjourned to a sitting room where Artie took the lead by asking the three applicants about their time at Hogwarts and their best and favorite subjects. Titus (unsurprisingly for a Slytherin) was fond of Potions and had taken first place in that class. He was also quite good at Transfiguration, though he conceded amiably that Bobby was better. Penelope spoke enthusiastically about her interest in Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. She had been top of her class in both those classes as well as Charms. Bobby

also did well in Charms and Transfiguration, but his favorite class was DADA. The Hufflepuff admitted somewhat sheepishly that his least favorite class was the one taught by his Head of House, as his allergies meant that he generally left Herbology lessons with red eyes, clogged sinuses, and occasionally an itchy rash. That did not deter him from taking the class through his NEWTS, but he had no intention of ever taking a job where he had to work with plants.

That naturally led to a question about the career goals of the three applicants, and they all glanced at one another nervously.

"Ministry job... if I can get it," said Titus somewhat glumly.

"The same, I guess," said Bobby quietly. "If my NEWTs are good enough."

"Your NEWTs will be fine, Lattimer," Titus scoffed.

"Fine's not good enough. They'll need to be spectacular to make up for...." The Muggleborn stopped there and blushed slightly.

Penelope shrugged. "To be honest, my family is still debating whether to emigrate sometime next year."

Sirius nodded at the answers. "If you'll forgive me for being blunt, Mr. Lattimer, can I assume you were going to say that your NEWTs will need to be spectacular to make up *for being a Muggleborn*."

The young man hesitated before nodding his head. "I'm not naïve, Lord Black. I've understood since my Sorting that a lot of wizards and witches would look down on me for being a

Muggleborn, but I still believed that if I worked hard enough, I could overcome it. But now..."

Bobby paused and swallowed. "I looked it up. I am the first Muggleborn to be chosen as Head Boy since 1946. And I am also the first Head Boy since then to *not* have a job of his choice waiting for him immediately after graduation. Penelope and Titus are in the same situation. But from what I've learned, every *Pureblood* Head Boy and Head Girl for the last ten years has actually been *recruited* by the Ministry beginning at the start of their last year, as have all the Pureblood prefects. And the ones who didn't go straight into the Ministry, usually in a prestigious starting post, were the ones who could turn job offers down either to start a Mastery or take a job in the private sector."

He let out a quiet laugh. "I, on the other hand, never got a single owl."

"Are you interested in a Mastery, Mr. Lattimer?" Artie asked.

"I... maybe. Either DADA or Transfiguration. But what I'm *really* interested in... is politics. Unfortunately, it's hard enough to find a master willing to take on an apprentice who can't afford to pay him, let alone get a foothold in Wizengamot politics as a Muggleborn from a poor family. Right now, I'm just hoping for a job that will let me set some money back to perhaps pay for a Mastery later."

"I think we can help you with that, Lattimer," Harry said with a smile. Artie took over for him.

"The job we're offering you-all three of you, in fact-is initially short term. Lord Wilkes has benefited greatly from summer tutoring in the past. However, neither of his tutors from the past two summers is available for this one."

At this, Bobby and Penelope both looked confused.

"But... Harry, I mean, Lord Wilkes can't use a wand during the summer?... Can he?" Penelope asked.

"There's an exception to the Trace," Titus said quietly. "If he pays for a special license, he can use a wand under the supervision of a qualified adult. It's... not advertised to Muggleborns."

Bobby started to take offense when Harry spoke.

"For what it's worth, the tutoring license isn't really some conspiracy against Muggleborns so much as a conspiracy against everyone who's not rich. The license is fairly expensive."

"Of course it is," Bobby muttered. "But still, why do you need *three* tutors?"

"Because this year, we're doing things a bit differently," Artie answered. "Instead of one-on-one tutoring, Harry will be joined by several of his friends, possibly as many as ten or so, most of whom are of different ages. Consequently, we'll be treating it almost like a day school. Each of you will be responsible for specific subjects for which you will need to prepare lesson plans for both Third Year and Fourth Year students."

"And possibly a couple of Sixth Years," Harry added. "Also, in addition to tutoring, a few of us are in Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, and we have several enchantment projects we want to explore over the summer. I know all three of you took both Ancient Runes and Arithmancy through your NEWTs."

"But this is not just a part-time summer job," Hestia added. "It's also an opportunity for us to evaluate the three of you. You see, at the end of the summer, both Lord Wilkes and Lord Black will take their Oaths of Unity and officially become Lords of the Wizengamot. Mr. Podmore will be serving as Seneschal for House Wilkes, and I will perform the same role for House Black. However, while our law firm is perfectly capable of handling the legal and political affairs of these two houses, Lord Wilkes and Lord Black will also each require someone to function as a personal assistant. Someone to liaise between Lord and Seneschal as needed. Someone to handle the scheduling and organization of each Lord's meetings and social events. Someone to deal with their correspondence with Ministry officials and other Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot. In short, someone capable of representing an Ancient and Noble House. Naturally, if you play your cards right, a position like this could be incredibly beneficial in developing contacts and gaining personal recognition in addition to the standard compensation."

The three graduates were shocked by Hestia's description. But Titus had a question.

"You indicated that you will have job openings for two assistants. But there's three of us."

"As far as the job that's on the table right now," Sirius said, "there's only two spots. However, if you impress us over the summer, I'm pretty sure we'll find room for a third. Also, Mr. Lattimer mentioned an interest in pursuing a Mastery. To sweeten the pot, at the end of a year's service, if any of you still want a Mastery, we'll pay for it and work out either a repayment plan or a period of oathbound service equal to what we paid."

"Oh," Harry added, "you'll also get free room and board here. I've got seventeen bedrooms. Might as well get someone to fill them."

"So," Artie asked. "Does the job I've described interest any of you?"

Bobby looked back and forth between Titus and Penelope. "When can we start?" he said eagerly.

27 June 1994

DMLE Headquarters

"You understand, of course, how problematic this is," the Death Eater said diplomatically.

James Potter nodded respectfully and tried not to think about the whole "Death Eater" thing, as he thought it would not be a fruitful topic for discussion during this job interview. He still had no idea what Fudge and Bones were thinking in appointing someone like Corban Yaxley to the Directorship of the DMLE. Of course, given James's own hiring decisions in the past, he had little room to complain.

"I'm well aware of the scandals surrounding my departure from the Auror Corps, Director Yaxley," he said cautiously. "However, as an Animagus, I am effectively required to serve in the Ministry in some capacity. And given my past work experience, I would think that something pertaining to law enforcement would make the best use of my abilities."

"And in principle, I agree," said Director Yaxley airily. "But we have to acknowledge *the facts*, Potter. And the most important fact right now is that we have five Hit Wizards in the permanent spell damage ward of St. Mungo's laughing

their heads off due to your man Pettigrew, not to mention several more who died or were wounded during his escape with Rookwood."

"I know I made terrible mistakes where Pettigrew was involved," James said while biting down on his temper. A part of him wondered if Yaxley had known Peter as a fellow Death Eater back in the day. "And I understand why the Hit Wizards might have a poor opinion of me as a result of those mistakes. But still...."

Yaxley put up a hand to silence Potter while he considered the matter. Then, he leaned back in his chair and smiled.

"Actually, Potter, I know exactly where I can put you! Someplace where your talents can best be used but without you being a lightning rod for controversy! And also someplace that, in my opinion, has been understaffed in recent years!"

Yaxley leaned forward. "And as I recall, you were a strong proponent for the Muggle Protection Act, were you not?"

"I was," James replied.

"Well, then! This will be *just perfect* !"

The Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office

Thirty Minutes Later...

Arthur Weasley reviewed the ministerial decree with wide eyes before looking back up to the man who'd brought it. Perhaps the last person he'd ever expected to settle for an entry-level job in the least popular Ministry department now stood in front of his desk bearing a small box of office

supplies and as cheerful an expression as it was possible for the man to fake.

"Well, this is... certainly a... surprise," Arthur said somewhat lamely. "But... are you quite sure this position is going to be a good fit for you, Lord Potter?"

"Absolutely," James said even as his forced smile grew slightly painful. "And please, while I'm here, just forget I'm a Lord of anything. Just think of me as your humble assistant."

There was a loud "hrumph" behind him from Perkins who sat at the other desk that had been crammed into the tiny office.

"That's *junior* assistant... *right*?"

James swallowed and willed his smile to stay in place. He remembered now that Perkins had been banished down here to the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office to work as Weasley's assistant after washing out of the Hit Wizards. Drinking on the job, if James remembered right. And now Perkins would be his *other* superior.

"Right, of course, definitely... *junior* assistant."

"Cheer up, Perkins!" Arthur said as he reviewed the orders again. "Potter doesn't come here emptyhanded! We've also been approved for larger office space!"

"Oh? Where are they moving us?" Perkins asked, somewhat excitedly while his boss continued to read.

Arthur coughed to clear his throat. "Room 247... right next to the boiler room."

Perkins glared at James. "Welcome aboard," he said with visible disdain.

James smiled even harder. Meanwhile, while Potter's back was to him, Arthur discreetly moved a letter he'd received that morning off to the side before his new junior could notice the Wilkes House seal on it.

The Burrow

Later that evening...

After a long day spent relocating the Office of Misuse of Muggle Artifacts to its new location (which was somehow even more cramped and uncomfortable than before), Arthur Weasley traveled by Floo to the Burrow to find two extra guests sitting at the dinner table with Molly: Harry Black and Artemus Podmore.

"Ah, Lord Wilkes!" he said in surprise. "I do apologize, but I was late at the office and haven't had a chance to change into something more formal."

"Well please don't on our account, Mr. Weasley," the boy said amiably. "And please, call me Harry."

"Only if you will call me Arthur," the man said as he sat at the table and addressed his wife. "Where are the kids, Molly?"

"Percy is in his room, the Twins are out flying, Ginny is at the Lovegoods, and Ron is... out."

Arthur nodded knowingly. During their first day of working together, James had given him the Potters' Floo address and said that Ron was welcome any time. And in light of the

letter sent by Podmore on Harry's behalf, Arthur decided to contact Molly during his lunch break and have her send his youngest son to visit the Boy-Who-Lived for the rest of the day. Like most of the Ministry, Arthur was aware of the Oath of Enmity between House Black and House Potter (one-sided as it was), and he'd decided that Ron's presence at the Burrow might *complicate* their discussions.

Arthur sat down at the table across from the two guests while Molly sat at his side. "As I understand from your letter, you wished to meet with us regarding... satisfaction of a life debt? Does this have something to do with what happened with Ron at the end of his Second Year?"

Harry looked confused for a moment until he realized what Arthur meant. The letter had just mentioned satisfaction of a life debt owed, but Harry was surprised to realize the elder Weasleys didn't know what debt he was talking about.

"Indirectly," Harry said. "I'm not claiming a life debt from Ron. Both Jim and Ginny were also down in the Chamber of Secrets, and we all helped one another to save him. I'm referring to the life debt I owe George."

Arthur and Molly looked at one another in confusion.

Harry hesitated. "Can I assume that he didn't tell either of you what he did for me on the morning of all that Chamber of Secrets business?"

"I don't recall him mentioning anything that might involve a *life debt*," Molly said. "Though I remember he was in the Infirmary when we got to Hogwarts. I think he said he helped to get you out of the Greenhouse before it exploded, but before we got any details, Fawkes brought you all there and we were distracted by Ron's condition."

Harry braced himself. He assumed Molly would shriek.

"George wasn't near the greenhouse when it exploded, Mrs. Weasley. He was *inside* it. With me."

"WHAAAT?!" she shrieked.

Harry went on to explain that he had inadvertently triggered an explosive rune trap which he blamed on "Professor Lockhart and his evil book" and that George had bravely followed him in before rescuing them both with an innovative use of the Protego Orbis Charm. Arthur and Molly were gobsmacked.

"I had no idea," Arthur said faintly.

"To be honest, I'm not surprised," Harry said. "Despite the Twins' knack for drawing attention, George can be quite humble about things not related to pranking. But if it hadn't been for him, I'd have died that day. And now, I'm in a position to repay the debt I owe him, and to your entire family."

"Lord Wilkes-Harry-George didn't save you for money. He did it because it's the right thing to do."

"I know that, Mr. Weasley. To be honest, I'm not sure I'd feel so strongly about owing him if I thought he'd saved me for selfish reasons."

He paused while struggling for words. "The thing of it is... you Weasleys are good people. I only got to spend a few days here summer before last, but I can honestly say that it was my first exposure to what a *real family* should be like."

Arthur blushed while Molly's eyes grew misty. Harry continued.

"I really do feel like I owe my life to George and, by extension, your whole family. And if I have to owe a life debt to someone, I'd rather it be people who I like and would be proud to help out."

Arthur nodded. "And what did you have in mind?"

Harry looked to Artie and nodded.

"House Wilkes proposes to pay House Weasley's dues to the Wizengamot for the next five years," he said.

Both the elder Weasleys looked faint. "That's... that's...." Molly stammered.

"A great deal of money, I think, is what my wife is trying to say," Arthur added. "That's very generous, Lord... Harry. But I can't accept that. I do have hopes that we will someday reactivate our Noble seat. But when we do, it will be because our whole House has earned it. I wouldn't feel right about accepting such a benefit for something one of my sons did, as proud of him as I may be for it."

Artemus turned back to Harry with a grimace and then handed him a sickle. Harry turned to the Weasleys with a smirk.

"I *told* him you would be too honorable for something that direct. So how about we start with something *less* generous and go from there. House Wilkes proposes to pay for the education of your remaining minor children through a Mastery if they want one. In addition, House Wilkes proposes to pay for summer wand-training licenses for George, Fred, Ginny, and Ron and to invite them all to my home for private lessons this summer."

That offer seemed a bit more acceptable to the Weasleys, and Artie explained how Harry's "day school" would work. The kids would travel to the manor via Floo and would be able to use their wands under adult supervision from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. four days a week. They would also be able to practice flying, as the manor had a full-size Quidditch pitch. And if there were any other educational options the Weasleys wanted, Harry would be happy to provide them.

"Bear in mind, this is *not* in satisfaction of the life debt," Harry added. "I owe your family a lot more than this. This is just the least I could do, and I wish you'd let me do more."

After a few minutes of questions, Molly and Arthur stepped out to discuss the offer. While they were gone, the Twins entered through the back door.

"Harrikins!" exclaimed George. "What's our favorite sneaky snake doing here?"

Harry explained the situation to Fred's horror.

"You're trying to talk our Mum and Dad into making us study for most of the Summer?!"

Artie laughed. "More like, we're trying to talk your parents into letting you be able to use *your wands* for most of the Summer."

Fred made a face. "Okay, that does sweeten the deal, I reckon."

After a few minutes, Molly and Arthur returned.

"On behalf of House Weasley," Arthur said, "I graciously accept your offer of instruction for our children. And I hope

this marks the beginning of friendship between our two Houses."

"We do have one small condition, though," Molly said while holding up her thumb and forefinger a half-inch apart. "I think it would be best if I accompanied the children to make sure everything's alright and that they all behave themselves."

At the end, Molly's eyes cut over to the Twins, who gave their most innocent expressions.

"That would be perfectly acceptable," Artie said. "As I'm sure Harry would agree."

"Definitely," Harry said cheerfully. In point of fact, it wasn't acceptable at all because if Molly was watching, the Twins would not have the freedom to "experiment." And Harry had quite a few suggestions for future experiments. But he could hardly deny Molly the right to accompany her children to an unfamiliar location.

"*Oh well,*" he thought to himself as he stepped forward to shake Arthur's hand. "*I guess I'll need to figure out how to distract her from time to time.*"

But before anyone else could comment, there was a loud fwoosh from the Floo, and Ron's voice called out from the next room.

"Mum? Mr. Potter's not home from work yet. Is it okay if Jim eats... with... us?"

Ron trailed off as he entered the dining area in time to see Harry and his dad shaking hands, with Harry's lawyer standing off to the side. Harry turned, and the smile fell from his face as he saw Jim standing next to Ron in the doorway.

"Are we interrupting something?" Jim asked suspiciously.

A silence fell across the room that was broken by Fred's stage whisper to his Twin.

"Awwwwwkward. "

4 Privet Drive, Surrey

Ten minutes later...

"Oh, you're back!" Lily said in a surprised tone. "Is something going on at the Burrow?"

"Yeah," Jim replied distractedly as he brushed the Floo powder off his shoulders. "They're... they're having a family meeting. So I guess I'll be eating here after all."

Lily studied Jim's face. "What happened?"

"It's noth-!"

"Jim," Lily interrupted firmly.

The Boy-Who-Lived sighed loudly. "Harry was there. He's... apparently worked out a deal where Ron, Ginny, and the Twins will go to our... I mean, to Harry's place for summer tutoring four days a week."

"... Oh. Well... that's good for Ron, isn't it?" she asked cautiously.

Jim nodded but said nothing. Intellectually, he knew that he was under a magical compulsion to distrust his brother, and so he tried to avoid feeling paranoid. But he also knew that Harry was under a magical compulsion to hate him as well. So it wasn't entirely implausible that Harry had paid for the

Weasleys' summer schooling just to spitefully deprive Jim of his best friend's company for most of the summer.

"Listen," he finally said. "I'm gonna go lie down until dinner. Any word from Dad?"

"He should be home in an hour. Dinner will be ready at 7."

Jim adjusted the collar of his shirt and wiped his forehead. "Air conditioner out again?" he asked.

Lily nodded. "I'll cast some cooling Charms upstairs before we go to bed."

He nodded and went upstairs without another word. In his bedroom, Jim wiped his forehead again and then opened the small window to let in a breeze. He laid down on his bed and stared up at the ceiling while waiting for his parents to call him down as he wondered how life could get worse.

"Potter" Manor

11:00 p.m.

Harry Black stood once again before the mirror in his bathroom as he brushed his teeth and then rinsed his mouth. Once more, the boy studied his own reflection for a few seconds before leaning in closer and staring deep into his own green eyes. His forehead creased in concentration, and this time, he was rewarded, albeit painfully. With a sharp yelp, Harry staggered back and clutched his hand to his face to cover his left eye (which felt like it had just been stabbed).

Slowly, the boy pulled his hand away and then gasped at the sight of his reflection. Harry's green eyes were now *blue*.

"YES!" Harry exclaimed while giving a fist pump. But then, he leaned in closer to the mirror and frowned. His eyes were indeed blue. They just weren't the *same* blue. The eye on the right was pale, while the one on the left was a very dark blue. Much darker than was usually seen in human eyes, in fact. The left eye was also noticeably larger than the right eye as well, which was likely the source of Harry's sudden headache.

The boy grimaced and focused his attention on his mismatched eyes while he tried to concentrate on changing them back. He was partially successful. The right eye returned to its former green, but the left eye grew even larger in Harry's skull even as the blue iris expanded so that the sclera was blue as well.

The boy fumed and then summoned his house elf. "Dobby, would you please go and fetch Regulus? I appear to have broken one of my eyes again."

Later in Surrey...

The raven soared through the skies above Surrey on shadowed wings. While airborne, the troubles and stresses of the Boy-Who-Lived were forgotten. There was only the sky above and the ground below. The raven was content. Effortlessly, it glided down to perch on a tree branch, from which vantage point, the bird surveyed the area below with a regal expression.

Then, Jim stirred from his slumber... and immediately hissed in pain as his bed was suddenly quite uncomfortable. He opened his eyes and lifted his head to look around.

"Oh boy," he muttered nervously.

His nervousness was a predictable response to waking up in unfamiliar circumstances. In this instance, Jim Potter had awoken to find that he was not in his bed but rather lying on a thick branch halfway up a tree in someone's backyard. He didn't know whose tree or whose backyard save that it wasn't his own.

Further complicating Jim's evening was the fact that he was completely naked.

Cautiously, the boy climbed down from the tree and crept around the house as silently as possible. To his relief, the sign out front said Privet Drive. Unfortunately, the number on the sign said No. 33 rather than No. 4, which meant Jim had a bit of a jog ahead of him. After fishing an empty cardboard box out of a bin and fashioning it into something slightly less mortifying than total nudity, he started on his trek back home.

The first rays of dawn were only just breaking over the horizon by the time he arrived. It had been a quick run and less embarrassing than expected - Jim had only needed to fling himself into nearby bushes three times to avoid getting spotted by passing cars. Once back at No. 4, Jim snuck around to the back and looked up to the open window of his bedroom. Then, after discarding his makeshift cardboard loincloth, he spent a moment to focus on his breathing before running straight for the rear wall and scampering up the trellis with ease.

Unfortunately, Jim thought he was home-free, only to be denied. He had just grabbed the sill of his bedroom window and was about to pull himself inside when the window suddenly slammed itself shut, narrowly missing the boy's fingers! With a startled yelp, Jim fell backwards and lost his grip on the windowsill. Even as he fell, Jim twisted in mid-air

so that he could see the ground approaching. But then, just before his face could strike the ground, Jim was suddenly skimming across the grass instead. With a powerful thrust of his wings, the raven took flight and then arced back gracefully towards the house. The bird spread its wings out to glide in for a landing, but it was Jim's bare feet that touched down onto the grass.

The boy looked down at his hands in amazement. He was certain they'd been wings just a second before. He looked back up at the window for a second before closing his eyes in deep concentration. Alas, after a good ten seconds of effort, Jim was unable to find the psychic switch that would let him intentionally transform into his Animagus form. On the bright side, it seemed he could change reflexively to avoid getting hurt or worse from a fall. Unfortunately, it also seemed that he could transform while unconscious for a bit of "sleep-flying."

The boy grimaced and shook his head before taking another run for the back wall. He scampered up just as easily as before and then carefully pulled himself up onto the windowsill. To his relief, the window opened easily, and Jim slipped inside, his little adventure in public nudity finally at an end. His pajamas were lying in a pile on his bed, and he quickly redressed before getting back into bed. The clock on his nightstand said it was quarter past five.

As Jim Potter drifted back off to sleep, he could not hear the single whispered word that hung in the air even though there was no one present to have uttered it.

"Freak! "

Marseilles, With An S

Chapter 2: Marseilles, With An S

Shameless plug! My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now for sale, and I am presently working on the sequel. Check out my website for more information: <https://thesinisterman.com/home/>.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Harry Black

and the Resurrection Game

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Chapter 2: Marseilles, With an S

28 June 1994

4 Privet Drive

1:30 p.m.

"I bet if I begged enough, I could talk Mum and Dad into letting me out of going to... *summer school*," Ron said with disdain dripping off the last two words.

Jim laughed. Ron still had a week before his summer tutoring (sponsored by Harry Black) began, so he'd wheedled permission to come see Jim after finishing his morning chores. Presently, the Boy-Who-Lived and his best friend were in the backyard of 4 Privet Drive working on their katas.

"Come on, mate," his friend said. "Your folks would never turn down the chance for you to get summer wand training. It'll put you in the top ten next year for sure given how much you improved just from spending last summer in Shamballa. To be honest, I'm embarrassed that I never asked Dad to pay for you to have a wand license so we could train together back when..."

His voice trailed off abruptly. "*When my family was rich* " was how that sentence was going to end.

"Still," Ron replied, "I hate that you're going to be stuck here alone all summer. Is there anything to do here in Muggle Town?"

Jim shrugged. "I haven't really gone exploring yet. I think Mum's worried I'll say or do something stupid that breaks the Statute of Secrecy."

"How? I'm a Pureblood, and I at least know how to walk to the corner store without starting an international incident!"

Jim laughed. "It's not that bad. I went with Mum and Dad to the grocery store the other night. I'd never seen one before. I'd always just assumed that the house elves made it all from nothing. And Saturday, we're going into London to buy some more Muggle clothes."

"Sounds exciting."

"Ah, shut up," Jim said in response to Ron's smirk. "I'm living the Muggle life now. I have to get my kicks where I can."

"Uh-huh," Ron said dubiously. "So has anything interesting happened since you moved in?"

At that, Jim's face turned pensive. He glanced back up at the house to make sure Lily wasn't watching out the back window.

"Well, I'm pretty sure I turned into a raven last night," he finally said.

Ron blinked a few times. "Okay. Is that a weird Muggle expression I've never heard before or are we talking actual raven?"

"The latter," Jim replied before going into the story of his adventure from the previous night. Ron couldn't help but laugh.

"Wait, you woke up naked in a tree?!"

"Shhh!" Jim hissed. "Mum and Dad don't know."

"Well, if you're changing uncontrollably into an Animagus form, don't you think you should tell them? Or at least tell your dad since he actually is an Animagus?"

Jim looked away. "It was... kind of an impulse when I went all the way with the ritual Remus did for me. All my Mum knows is that I was working on a partial transformation to get an Animagus's natural Occlumency defenses. Dad doesn't even know that much. I'm kind of worried about how they'll take it since I'm not registered."

"Well, the way I see it," Ron replied. "You can either tell them now, or you can start working on an explanation to give them whenever you get arrested for indecent exposure!"

A week later at the Manor

On July 4, summer lessons began at the still-to-be-renamed "Potter" Manor, and after a few weeks, Harry found himself quite pleased with how things had been going. In addition to himself, Theo, Amy, and the four minor Weasley children, the group was joined by Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom, Sue Li, Anthony Goldstein, and Justin Finch-Fletchley. On the first morning, Harry had two laughs-in addition to the look of aghast horror on Titus Mitchell's face when he realized he'd be teaching the Weasley Terrors, there was also Regulus's gobsmacked expression when Harry introduced him to Hermione in his new identity as "Archie Goodwin," the American Halfblood bodyguard.

"By any chance, Mr. Goodwin, have you ever read a Muggle author named Rex Stout?" she asked in complete innocence.

"... Never heard of him," Archie muttered irritably.

Those two brief hiccups aside, the summer lessons went splendidly (for Harry, at least), though he did notice that Hermione seemed a bit withdrawn. After some cajoling, he persuaded the girl to reveal what had left her so distracted. Apparently, the young witch was coming every day by Floo... and specifically, via the fireplace in her father's new apartment. Mr. and Mrs. Granger were still working together as dentists, but they had apparently progressed to the "trial separation" stage of their slow-motion divorce. Mr. Granger (who seemed to be pursuing his squib heritage with some gusto) had gotten a Floo hookup for his new home.

Hermione stayed with him during the week and with her mother on the weekends, a development which saddened Harry even though he saw no way of consoling his young friend.

By the third day, Harry had managed to divert Molly Weasley from her hawk-like observation of Fred and George by introducing her to Buttercup and his own personal kitchen. Within a week, Harry had inked a deal with the Weasleys so that Molly's Magical Morsels could make free use of that space and also of the Potter house elves when their duties to the manor were complete. In fact, Harry had offered the space for free, but Molly had insisted on a rental agreement, so he would instead be collecting a small percentage of the profits generated by any food she prepared for her clients while at the manor. As a bonus, he also personally hired her to cater the Jim Potter Birthday Gala, though this year, he would not be on hand to witness it.

The kitchen wasn't the only part of Potter Manor that Harry had subleased, either. While the arrangements were much more informal, one large room had been given over to the Goldstein Group (which was brainstorming on ways to perfect and commercialize Eye-Spies) and another to Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes (the Twins' proposed joke shop).

"What are Wheezes anyway?" Harry had asked.

"It's a word that starts with W," Fred answered with a shrug. "Georgie-Boy mistakenly thought it was a Muggle word for jokes."

"The idea," George added irritably, "was that our products would be so funny that you would wheeze with laughter

when you saw them in use. And anyway, we were going to call it Weasleys' Wizarding Wonders, but apparently there is already a company called WonderWitch that sells cheap knock-off love potions, and they've got a reputation for suing anyone that sells a potion with 'Wonder' in the title. We may change it if we think of something better."

But despite all the work that his classmates were putting into their summer activities, it was Harry who pushed himself the hardest. He had eight hours of magical instruction from his hired tutors on Monday through Thursday, bookended by two hours of physical conditioning and Wu Xi Do in the morning and two hours of dueling practice after dinner. On the weekend, Harry also spent several hours each day working with Regulus to develop his metamorphic powers, and by the end of July, he could reliably change his eye color and hold the new look indefinitely. Reshaping his hair, let alone changing its color, was more taxing, though, and while Harry could make his scar disappear, doing so caused headaches and could only be done for twenty minutes before the lightning bolt scar returned. Finally, Harry still met with Professor Snape every Sunday afternoon for training in both Occlumency and Legilimency.

In addition to helping refine the skills Harry already had, Snape introduced three new concepts. First was the *Advocatus Diaboli*, a technique for creating a secondary personality capable of providing (mostly) impartial advice and opinion. To Harry's surprise, however, Snape became surprisingly evasive when the boy asked him about his own *Advocatus*. He assumed, given Snape's background, that it was probably based on a Death Eater or someone else Harry might disapprove of.

The second technique was called neural suppression, which was a way of temporarily shutting off pain receptors so that the Occlumens could continue to function even while injured. Unfortunately, it didn't protect the Occlumens from magical sources of pain such as the Cruciatus, but it could allow him to continue to function despite otherwise debilitating physical damage.

Finally, Snape formally began basic instruction on ward sensing, a concept he'd introduced during the summer after Harry's First Year. Ward sensing was actually the most commonly used form of Legilimency, as all curse-breakers, enchanters, and spell designers were expected to be proficient at it. If that is, they didn't want to die horribly from dangerous magic they'd failed to recognize.

After a solid three weeks of intense study, Harry was ready for a break. On July 23, Harry, Theo, and Neville (chaperoned by Archie Goodwin) made their way to Heathrow Airport where they joined Justin Finch-Fletchley and his parents. Soon after, they all boarded the Learjet owned by Justin's wealthy family for a week-long trip to Marseilles. In their absence, the other students would enjoy a week off from study. Meanwhile Sirius grumbled about not being able to accompany Harry, but Andromeda Tonks put her foot down and absolutely refused him permission to leave the country.

"And certainly not on some damnable Muggle flying contraption!" she'd snapped. "Who knows what effect it might have on you! Or what effect your magic might have on an aeroplane if it starts acting up while you're a mile up in the air!"

While en route to the south of France, Justin and his parents were all acutely aware of the fact that most of their guests had never been on a plane before. Archie Goodwin clearly

had some experience with Muggle air travel, but the three younger wizards reacted to being in a jet with varying degrees of excitement and terror.

Far sooner than any of the wizards could have anticipated, the jet landed at Marseilles airport where they were met by Gunther Hagrid and the van he had rented for the occasion. As the van pulled out from the airport parking lot, Harry noticed the sign in front of the facility.

"I thought there was an S at the end of Marseilles," he asked aloud.

"There is in the British spelling," said Mr. Finch-Fletchley amiably. "Of course, adding a silent S to a French place-name that French-speakers don't use is perhaps the most British thing ever."

Justin laughed, but his father had to explain to the other young wizards about the traditional rivalry between Britain and France, as Theo and Neville knew literally nothing about the latter country and Harry only knew that he admired the French for their cuisine.

More interesting than the history lesson, for Harry at least, was the easygoing manner in which Mr. Finch-Fletchley delivered it. In his two prior interactions with Justin's parents, both of them had seemed to be affected by the mysterious curse Harry had been under for most of his life, the curse that caused Muggles to develop an instinctive and intense dislike for him. To his surprise, Harry did not sense any animosity from the Muggles today. He wondered what had changed and resolved to speak to Snape about it upon his return to Britain.

For the next several days, the group would be staying at "the Farm," Blaise's name for the country manor house on

the grounds of his family's French vineyard just a few miles outside Marseilles proper. While not as impressive as either Potter Manor or Longbottom Manor, the Farm still had an excessive number of guest bedrooms. Once everyone was settled in for the week-long stay, the group met downstairs for lunch followed by an afternoon trip to a private beach on the Riviera. The swimming was excellent, and, as Blaise had promised, there was even windsurfing, which Harry took to with considerable skill.

That night, after dinner, as the grownups in attendance congregated around a card table for a few hours of bridge, Blaise led his friends to a guesthouse that had been warded to allow technology to function properly within. Just outside was a satellite dish that was plugged into the largest TV screen Harry had ever seen (and, of course, the only one that Neville and Theo had ever seen). Even Justin was impressed. And also pleased, as he'd brought the first movie the boys would be watching all the way from his father's collection back in Edinburgh.

"So that's James Bond?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Justin replied. "Well, one of them."

"I thought this Bond fellow was one of the good guys!" Neville exclaimed in a scandalized tone. "He's beating up some poor widow on the day of her husband's funeral!"

"No, Neville," said Harry, who was following the plot better than his wizard-raised friends. "The widow is actually the guy who's supposed to be dead. He's a villain and he threw a fake funeral to throw his enemies off the trail before disguising himself as a woman."

"Oh?" Theo asked dubiously. "Is that something Muggles do often?"

"What?" Blaise responded. "Fake their own deaths or dress up as women when they're actually men?"

"... Either?"

"Whoah!" Neville interrupted before anyone could answer. "Muggles can fly?! I mean besides in a plane?!"

"That's called a jet pack," Justin explained, as in the background, wailing trumpets and Tom Jones introduced the theme from *Thunderball*. "Muggles do have them. It's... not an efficient way to travel, though. Think of it like a backpack that can generate a continual Ventus out of the bottom."

But while the wizard-raised guests were awed and impressed with their first James Bond movie, they were utterly baffled and confused by Blaise's choice for a follow-up: *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

"What's a moose?" Neville asked.

"A large elk-like creature found in Scandinavia and North America," Justin answered.

"They sure do seem to have a lot of them in a story about King Arthur," the Gryffindor said.

"Actually, there are no moose in the movie," Blaise explained. "Nor llamas. That's what makes it funny."

Neville and Theo looked at one another.

"... I'll take your word for it," Theo said.

Sadly, while Justin and Blaise laughed through the whole movie, Theo and Neville never seemed to get the absurdist humor of Monty Python, though they did come away with

the impression that cross-dressing was far more common among Muggles than they'd ever imagined. As for Harry, he was initially as baffled as his two brothers, right up until the Black Knight said "I've had worse!" in response to losing an arm. And then, something clicked in the boy's brain and he laughed out loud.

Before his trip to Marseilles was over, Harry would watch every Monty Python videotape in Blaise Zabini's possession, some of them twice.

28 July 1994

Hotel St. Germain

Paris, France

On the night of July 27, Harry and his associates traveled by Portkey to Le Quartier Magique in the heart of Paris and checked into the luxury wizarding hotel, L'Hotel St. Germain. The St. Germain, in addition to being one of the most famous wizarding hotels in the world, was also the host site for the 328th Paris Open, the first European dueling competition of the season that was open to novice duelists. Countess Zabini had rented out several suites in the hotel for her guests.

Early the next morning, Harry and Justin went downstairs to register at a table beneath the large banner that read "EUROPEAN STUDENT LEAGUE - NOVICE CLASS." By Harry's estimate, there were about fifty kids from all over Europe between the ages of twelve to sixteen who were competing this morning. And as near as Harry could tell, nearly all of them (even the younger participants) had been dueling for longer than he and Justin had been. Suddenly, Harry's

"debut" threatened to become a more daunting experience than he'd initially realized.

The preliminaries were relatively unstructured and had two components. For the first two hours, all the novices would go through "the compulsories," which consisted of each contestant demonstrating all the spells from the approved list which they had mastered before a panel of six judges. In Harry's case, that meant demonstrating *all the spells*. Regulus had been annoyingly thorough on that point. There were a few younger contestants who simply didn't know enough spells to make it through the compulsories and so were eliminated, but most of those who'd come to this competition knew what they were in for and were proficient with enough spells to pass the first round.

Next, each remaining novice was assigned a dueling schedule for the rest of the morning. All the matches would be held in the hotel's Grand Ballroom, a massive space twice the size of the Hogwarts Great Hall, and one that was currently occupied by eight rectangular dueling spaces spread out with room for spectators on all sides. There were additional seats on raised platforms along each wall so that spectators could watch all the matches simultaneously if they wished.

Harry's schedule did not identify any opponents by name. He was simply given a list of five time slots, as well as the number of the dueling space where each of his best-of-three duels would be held. He would not find out who his opponent was until just before the next duel started. These preliminary duels were point-based, meaning that each duel would have three judges evaluating the duelists in terms of skill, poise, and depth of spellcasting knowledge. The top sixteen novices would then be seeded into a single-elimination tournament to begin that evening. While

obviously winning a duel conveyed a lot of points, it was not the only factor. They were novices, after all, and dumb luck would be a huge factor in a lot of this morning's duels.

Harry and Justin fist-bumped one another for luck before heading off for their first-round duels. And soon after, Harry's nervousness began to dissipate, as his first opponent was a German wizard named Horst (his surname was given, but Harry found it unpronounceable). Horst was a heavyset 12-year-old who'd just finished his second year at Beauxbatons, and the boy's lack of experience showed. Harry took him down rather easily in two straight rounds without even needing to dilate.

The next two opponents went down as well, if not as easily as poor young Horst. But then, in his fourth match, Harry found his first real opponent: Albert Yaxley, who'd just finished his Fourth Year at Durmstrang. Apparently, the younger of Corban Yaxley's two sons was rather active in dueling at school, but he'd never had the chance to pursue it competitively before now. Making up for lost time, Albert came for Harry aggressively as soon as the duel commenced and after a furious 45-second contest, he became the first person to disarm Harry since the day began, knocking him to the ground in the process. With a smirk, he tossed Harry's wand back.

"Come on then!" he said with a mean laugh. "Surely Hogwarts can do better than that!" Then, he walked back to his end of the dueling floor where his older brother Giles merrily clapped him on the back.

Harry's eyes narrowed, and he turned to give Archie a meaningful look. His coach sighed and then nodded as if to grant his permission. Harry returned to his opening stance, but only after wordlessly activating the Averno shield on the

tip of his wand. Fifteen seconds later, Albert Yaxley was lying flat on his back wondering what had happened, and he didn't fare much better in the tie-breaking round which also ended with a decisive victory for Harry.

"Hmm," said Theo as Harry stepped down from the dueling platform. "He's not a happy camper, is he?"

Harry glanced back and noted the younger Yaxley was glaring at him furiously. He shrugged.

"Pfft. A Death Eater's son is mad at me. Like that's never happened before."

Later, after dispatching his final competitor, Harry and his friends returned to the ballroom for the announcement of the brackets for the novice tournament that would take place that evening. After lunch, the facilities would be given over to compulsories and preliminaries for the Junior Open Class duels with the actual tournament for that class to be held the next on Friday night. Friday morning and afternoon would see the adult Open Class compulsories and prelims, with the finals for that group on Saturday morning. The World Class tournament was scheduled for Saturday but would have neither compulsories nor preliminary duels. Rather, the thirty-two World Class duelists would be there because he or she had done well enough in prior tournaments to merit an invitation.

As the two boys and their friends waited patiently, a portly French wizard stepped up to a lectern and cast the Sonorous Charm to announce the results. But as Harry tried to listen to the announcer, he was suddenly distracted as Blaise visibly tensed up next to him. He glanced at his friend who was staring off to the side, and when Harry looked in the same

direction, he realized who had drawn Zabini's attention. It was a gaggle of teenage girls all chattering in French. One in particular drew Harry's attention as well: a remarkably alluring teenage girl, about 16 or so, with silvery-gold hair. She looked around the room before saying something to her friends and then laughing coquettishly.

"Friend of yours?" Harry asked quietly.

Blaise grimaced. "An... acquaintance. Fleur Delacour from Beauxbatons. She'll be competing in Open Class later."

"Is she any good?"

The other boy hesitated. "At dueling? She's a very good duelist, but she hasn't been able to make it into World Class. I'm... surprised she's here today, to be honest."

"Oh?" Harry asked before sliding his glasses down to look at Blaise meaningfully over the rims. "Anything else you can share about her?"

Blaise grimaced. Then, he pretended to cough into his hand as he whispered: "*Sunday night* ."

Harry nodded. Sunday, he would turn fourteen, and the Countess Zabini was throwing a small party back at the Farm in his honor. Later, after the party was over, she would give Harry a private Tarot card reading (his second such reading from the mysterious witch). According to Blaise, if she liked what she saw in his future, the Countess would share with Harry all, or at least some, of the secrets that Blaise had been keeping from him since the day they first met. One of those secrets apparently involved one Mademoiselle Fleur Delacour.

He turned back to the girl in question and made a mental note to catch a few of her preliminary duels. But before he could ask anything else, Harry heard Justin's name called out as the 6th seed in the Novice tournament. The young Slytherin didn't recognize any of the next several names announced, and he wondered if he had missed his name being called earlier, or worse, if he'd somehow missed the cut despite a total of fifteen rounds with only one loss. Finally, the announcer called out Albert Yaxley as the 2nd seed... and *Harry Black as the 1st* !

Even though he'd thought he'd done well in the prelims, the boy was still shocked at the announcement and caught by surprise when all his friends crowded around to let out whoops of celebration. Archie came over to clap him warmly on the shoulder.

"Well done, Harry! I'm very proud of you!"

"As am I," said a familiar voice from nearby. "And I'm doubly glad I got here just in time."

Harry spun around in shock. It was Sirius Black, who strode forward to pull the boy into a hug.

"Sirius! How did you get here?!" Archie exclaimed in surprise.

With a grin, Sirius pointed over his shoulder at an exhausted but upbeat Bobby Lattimer who was standing just behind him.

"My *minion* brought me!" Sirius said with a broad grin. "Can you believe that he didn't think to mention to me until yesterday that he had a car and knew how to drive it?!"

Harry did a double-take and turned to the young Hufflepuff. "Wait, you drove here from London?!"

Bobby nodded and yawned. "Yeah. Had to borrow my Mum's Ford Fiesta. We left around 4:00 a.m. London time and took the ferry from Dover to Calais. It took a lot of black coffee, but we got here."

"Indeed we did," Sirius said merrily. "Though before we head back, I may have to install a few spatial expansion Charms on it."

Bobby's eyes widened comically at the thought of his eccentric employer casting some highly illegal spells on his Muggle mother's car, but Sirius had already turned back to Harry.

"I might not be able to Portkey, Apparate, or even fly to Paris, but I was never going to stop looking for a way to be here for you."

Harry looked speechless, but finally, his face broke out into a wide grin. "*Is this what it's like having a dad?*" he thought to himself.

Then, Blaise's mother stepped forward. "I do not believe we have been introduced, Lord Black," she said in a cultured Italian accent. "I am Serena Zabini."

Sirius turned to the witch, and his face flushed slightly. "Sirius Black," he said somewhat huskily as he bowed his head before taking the woman's hand in his own and gallantly kissing her knuckles. "Enchanté."

"Far be it from me to interrupt this heart-warming reunion, Sirius," said Archie. "But the hall is clearing out now for the Open Class prelims. Harry and Justin have a few hours before

their actual tournament competition starts. Perhaps they can go freshen up now and then we could continue over lunch? I'm sure the kids are all dying to hear what it was like spending hours on the A1 in a borrowed supermini, but you can regale them while we eat."

He turned to the Countess. "Countess Zabini, would you be so kind as to escort the youngsters upstairs?"

"But of course! Until later, Lord Black?"

"I can scarcely wait, Countess Zabini." Sirius turned to his driver. "Lattimer, follow along with the kids. I'm sure they can find you a couch to crash on for a few hours."

The rest of the group followed the Countess out of the Grand Ballroom, with Archie and Sirius bringing up the rear. They tarried just enough to get out of earshot, and Archie leaned in close to his brother.

"Before you get too carried away with your irresistible tendency towards rakishness, Lord Black, are you aware of the fact that the charming Countess Zabini has buried seven husbands?"

Sirius's eyes bulged in surprise. "I was not, and I thank you for the gossip. Although I suppose there could be worse ways to go."

The younger brother snorted. "Just so long as you make out a will before the first date, I suppose. Moving on, why did you really decide to drive to Paris?"

"I came to see my godson whup arse on the dueling court, of course!"

The metamorphmagus looked to his older brother and crooked an eyebrow until Sirius continued.

"*Aaaand*, I got some news yesterday. It's probably nothing to do with us, but it made me twitchy, so I started ranting about whether anyone else had a suggestion for getting here nonmagically. Young Lattimer suggested that he could drive me." Sirius laughed. "I think he's worried that I'll pick Mitchell over him, so he wanted to prove that a Muggleborn could be useful to an old Pureblood like me."

Archie's brow furrowed. "Hang on! Don't you *know* how to drive a car? I seem to recall Mother screaming about it at one point."

"Nah, just a motorbike. And for that, you just need to know how to turn it on and off, and otherwise, you just pretend it's a broom." He looked thoughtful as he suddenly wondered whatever happened to his old motorbike and sidecar.

"Ah. So anyway, what was the shocking news?"

Sirius reached into his jacket and pulled out the previous morning's Daily Prophet, which he handed over to the other man. It was already open to the Society Page.

"Well, well, well!" the disguised Regulus Black murmured. "I can see why this caught your eye."

At the top of the page was a moving photo of their cousin Narcissa standing arm-in-arm with a slightly stunned-looking Tiberius Nott. The blushing bride looked radiant in her wedding gown.

And the caption beneath the photo revealed that the new Lord and Lady Nott would be honeymooning right here in Paris.

Over lunch (at Summerisles-Paris, naturally), Sirius broke the news about the sudden remarriage of Theo's ex-father.

"Maybe it's for the best that Tiberius and Narcissa got married to one another," Blaise quipped. "That way, only two people are stuck in a horrible marriage instead of four."

"I should probably owl Draco," Justin said. "When we spoke last week, he mentioned nothing about this. I reckon it was a surprise to him too."

"How is Draco?" Harry asked. "I haven't seen him in almost a year."

"He seems to be enjoying Durmstrang. Better than his last year at Hogwarts, anyway. No giant petrifying snakes or anything like that. He spent the first half of the summer at Quidditch training camps: one in Austria and then another in Spain. He says he'll be at the Quidditch World Cup, though."

Harry nodded and then glanced to Theo, who was sitting on his left.

"How are *you* dealing with the news?"

Theo shrugged. "I'm worried about how this will affect Alex. Beyond that, I'm just rooting for injuries."

Later...

After lunch, Harry and Justin returned to the ballroom to watch some of the Open Class preliminary duels, with Archie, Sirius, and the Finch-Fletchleys as their chaperones. The other boys left the hotel for a tour of Le Quartier

Magique provided by the Countess, while Bobby Lattimer contentedly napped in the group's hotel suite.

Harry made it a point to catch one of Fleur Delacour's duels, and she took her opponent down with methodical efficiency. He had no way of knowing for sure, but he suspected the older girl could dilate her perceptions. If so, she would be the only other person that Harry had encountered who had that skill besides Snape and Dumbledore. Even Rufus Scrimgeour had never learned to dilate despite his considerable skill at Occlumency, a tragedy in retrospect as the skill might have saved his life in his battle against Rookwood and Pettigrew.

But even as Harry continued to study Delacour's precise and economical style, he stiffened as a soft hiss from the tattoo on his upper back intruded into his thoughts.

"Massster," hissed Mark. *"One who bearsss the Dark Mark drawsss near. Behind you."*

Harry turned casually in that direction, wondering what he would do if Tiberius Nott and/or Narcissa Black Nott (had she even kept her maiden name?) were sneaking up behind him. It was not them, however. Given his earlier encounter with Albert Yaxley, Harry was not terribly surprised to see that the Death Eater who Mark had detected was the boy's father, Corban Yaxley, the Lord of House Yaxley and the newly appointed Director of the DMLE.

"Lord Wilkes!" the Death Eater said rather cheerfully. "I don't think we've been formally introduced. I am Corban Lord Yaxley."

"It is an honor to meet you, sir," Harry lied. "And my congratulations on your recent promotion."

"Thank you. And you, of course, have my congratulations on your own ascension to the Wizengamot. Has there ever been a lord as young as yourself?"

"Not since the 17th century, or so I've been told."

Harry turned his attention to the two young men who stood on either side of the Death Eater, the younger of whom Harry had bested that morning. Albert Yaxley had perfunctorily shaken Harry's hand after losing their match 2-1, but the two had not spoken.

"And of course, congratulations on your son's performance today. I look forward to our rematch this evening."

"As do I," Albert said coolly. "But right now, we're on our way to watch my brother compete."

Harry's attention wandered to the other boy. Giles Yaxley was a Durmstrang Seventh Year and would be competing Open Class, having won the Novice championship two years earlier.

"Feel free to join us, Lord Wilkes," the elder Yaxley added. "We're on foreign soil for this competition. We Brits have to stick together, what?"

"Naturally. And speaking of fellow Brits, I'm sure I don't need to introduce Justin Finch-Fletchley, the Heir Presumptive of House Prince."

"Of course not," Yaxley said while plastering a fake smile on his face. "You certainly made an impression on the Wizengamot, Heir Prince."

"A good one, I hope," Justin said mildly. While not a Legilimens, Justin was a good enough student of human

nature to have noticed the look of mild distaste that flitted across Lord Yaxley's face at the mention of the notorious Mudblood who had dared to claim a seat in the Wizengamot, even if only through a regency.

Besides, Justin's magical guardian was Severus Snape, and he'd made a point of identifying to Justin everyone presently serving in the Wizengamot who had escaped prosecution as a Death Eater with a flimsy Imperius defense, one of whom was the man standing before him. In addition to having been cursed by the mysterious (and fictitious) Marcellus Frump, Yaxley had also been placed under the Imperius by Berith Selwyn, the former Selwyn Heir who confessed to using Unforgiveables to suborn several members of the extended Selwyn family into the Death Eaters. After his confession and conviction, Berith took his own life in a Ministry holding cell before he could even be transferred to Azkaban.

After a few moments of small talk, the Yaxleys left for Giles's next match. Justin leaned in towards Harry.

"So just between us, Yaxley's a former... you-know?"

"Yep."

The Hufflepuff nodded. "I'm pretty sure that was the first time since I claimed my Heirship that I noticed a Pureblood looking down on me like I was something to be scraped off their shoe. I'd almost forgotten what it felt like."

Harry chuckled, and then he, Justin, and Archie followed behind the Yaxleys.

"After all," Harry thought, "it could never hurt to study someone's fighting style. Especially someone who might try to kill you someday."

That night...

The Novice Class tournament began promptly at seven, with the top half of the seeded duelists quickly establishing their dominance in each best-of-five round. The only upset in the initial bracket was when the 10th seed-a fierce girl from Beauxbatons named Amaya Bidarte y Villalobos, who pointedly corrected the announcer that she was not Spanish but Basque-took down the 7th seed from Durmstrang in three straight rounds. Harry noticed that the Delacour girl was among the throng of Beauxbatons students cheering her on. While Harry respected Villalobos's aggressiveness, he still defeated her almost as handily as he had the 16th seed he saw first, a snotty rich American boy whose name Harry had already forgotten.

Justin had also done exceptionally well, winning his first round easily and then upsetting the 3rd seeded competitor, a lad from Beauxbatons named Rolf Scamander. Harry didn't know if Rolf was related to the famous Newt Scamander, but he did recognize several of the boy's hexes and curses from the Auror training manuals that Mad-Eye Moody had given him. Despite obviously being well-taught, though, Rolf couldn't get through Justin's masterful Avertio shield.

Unfortunately, Harry's hopes for an all-Hogwarts final were dashed when Justin went up against Albert Yaxley in the semi-final. The Durmstrang student wasn't just a ruthless duelist, he was a clever one as well. Recognizing Justin's powerful defensive skill, Yaxley focused on spells meant to bypass Avertio such as Avis Oppugno or simply Incendio (the latter of which was at the extreme edge of what was a permissible curse for novices). Avertio couldn't be used to parry a flock of birds any better than it could a gout of flame, and Justin went down 2-1.

Forty minutes later, it was time for the final match of the evening, the championship bout between Harry and Albert Yaxley. Both competitors had studied their opponents well, but Harry had the advantage of having seen how the Durmstrang student had defeated Justin. The first round went to Harry when Yaxley sent a flock of birds to attack him. Harry calmly activated his Vestamentarum shield before striding boldly through the flock to catch his shocked opponent with a flurry of Stunners. But the second round went to Yaxley, who set off a series of brilliant fireworks to obscure Harry's view. When his vision cleared, Harry was shocked to see that his opponent had disappeared! Instantly, Harry realized that Yaxley had Disillusioned himself, and out of reflex, he cast the Supersensory Charm to try to spot his opponent. But that was what Yaxley had counted on, and he immediately set off a second round of fireworks to temporarily deafen Harry before finishing him with a Knockback Jinx.

In the third round, Yaxley got cocky and tried the exact same trick again. Only this time, when he set off his fireworks, he was shocked when Harry also Disillusioned himself, and the audience was treated to the "sight" of two invisible duelists each of whom stood silently while waiting for the other to make the first attack (which would cause the attacker to become visible). After nearly thirty seconds, Harry carefully took a step to the left and then whispered the incantation for the Supersensory Charm again, but as softly as he could... while still making sure Yaxley heard him. Yaxley again set off a round of fireworks meant to deafen Harry once more, but since he hadn't actually cast the Supersensory Charm this time, the loud pops did not affect him. Instead, Harry cast a flurry of Stunners straight into the mass of fireworks, one of which tagged Yaxley.

The fourth round lasted six minutes, which was quite long for a novice level duel. Yaxley had gone mainly with fire-based hexes that Harry could not easily parry, and so the young Slytherin spent more time dodging than in any of his prior duels. Then, Yaxley saw an opening and fired off an Aguamenti and a Glacius in quick succession, causing Harry to slip on the conjured ice and fall. Yaxley nailed him with a Disarming Jinx before he could scramble back to his feet.

Frustrated, Harry called a time-out while the referee vanished the ice that still coated the dueling floor, and he stepped off the platform to consult his coach.

"Suggestions?" the boy said tersely.

"None," Archie said flatly. "You're doing everything right, Harry, and you're tied with this kid who's older than you and has been dueling longer than you." The man leaned in towards him and whispered, *"And he was raised by a Death Eater who'd been an Auror before joining the Dark Lord."*

"I didn't come here to lose," Harry snapped.

"And I'm not telling you to accept it. I'm just saying that I don't see how you get past him with the skills I've taught you, because other than Averno, he's learned all the same lessons. I'm incredibly proud of your performance today, Harry. But all I'll ever ask of you is that you do your best."

Harry made a face. "That was completely unhelpful. I wish Moody were here."

Archie chuckled as Harry turned and climbed back up onto the dueling platform for the final winner-take-all round. He paused to look out into the crowd, where all his friends along with Sirius were still cheering for him. To his surprise, the Delacour girl was in the stands sitting directly behind Blaise

and the Countess, and she was studying him with great intensity. The boy turned back to his opponent, took a deep cleansing breath and assumed his dueling stance. And at the referee's signal, the final round began.

This time, Harry decided to go for broke. He immediately fired off an Avis... followed instantly by a second Avis and then a third. Yaxley instantly cast Vestamentarum on himself, so he took no damage from the attacking birds, but he was surprised when there were suddenly so many birds flocking around him that he couldn't see Harry at all. With a snarl, he fired off an overpowered Finite that dispelled all the birds within range around him, but he was startled when his vision cleared to see two Harry Blacks at the opposite end of the platform.

The Doppelganger Defense was a legal Charm for dueling, but it was seldom used because usually the doppelganger could at most perform simple actions unless that caster stood still and focused on directing more complicated activities. So it was very unexpected to see both Black and his duplicate-the latter "piloted" by a secondary thought-stream Harry had opened-casting spells so perfectly in unison that Yaxley was unable to tell which one was real. As the two Harrys sent simultaneous Stunners at him (spaced just far enough apart that Yaxley could only sidestep one), the Durmstrang student had a millisecond of hesitation. Then, he *jumped*, casting a Ventus directly beneath himself as he did. The blast of air from his wand propelled the boy straight up, and he tucked his legs in so that the twin Stunners passed beneath, missing him by inches. To Harry's further frustration, Yaxley fired off a Stunner of his own to the person on the left which turned out to be the duplicate.

Harry's doppelganger winked out of existence even as the real Harry desperately fired off a volley of spells. But as

Yaxley fell back to the floor, he landed in a crouch and did a quick roll to avoid the attacks. Then, he came up to one knee and targeted Harry with a Leg-Locker Curse that was aimed low and beneath Harry's defenses. Harry tried to dodge, but the curse just barely clipped him in the shin, which was enough. The boy's legs slammed together, paralyzed, and his momentum caused him to lean precariously and then fall forward.

Yaxley exhaled heavily and then smirked. The Leg-Locker required a specialized counter-curse, and even if Black knew it, the counter-curse took roughly three seconds to cast. One of the victory conditions for a competitive duel was knocking your opponent to the ground in such a way that he could not get back to his feet within five seconds. Not that Black would even have five seconds-if he wasted time with the counter-curse, he'd be defenseless against Yaxley's finishing spell. Also, the rules forbade the use of spells while lying prone, and once Harry's chest and stomach were touching the ground, he couldn't legally cast a spell anyway without risking disqualification. It had been close, but this duel was over.

Almost.

As he fell, Harry dilated. ***Thump-thump*** . Even at his maximum dilation, though, the situation seemed hopeless. In roughly one second of objective time, he would fall flat on his face, and then Yaxley would finish him before he could get up again. Desperately, Harry's mind raced through all the dueling strategies he'd learned from his numerous teachers. But nothing Regulus had taught him would get him out of this spot, nor anything he'd learned from Moody or even Remus Lupin (not that he'd spent very much time learning from the Wu Xi Do master). But then, just a few feet away from a face-plant, Harry recalled one single fragment

of a conversation he'd had with yet another teacher: Theo No-Name.

Several weeks earlier...

"So explain to me what the point of this is?" Harry asked while huffing and trying to shake the sweat from his eyes. He was lying nearly horizontal and supported by just his left hand, as Theo had decided to add one-handed push-ups to their exercise routine. Nearby, Theo himself was showing off, pushing himself forcefully up from the ground with one hand while the other was behind his back. While still in the air, he would switch hands to catch himself by the other one before he could fall to the ground. He made it look annoyingly easy.

"It's called the *Tide Flows and Recedes* technique," Theo explained, causing Harry to roll his eyes. While he respected the cultural significance of Wu Xi Do for those who practiced it, he found most of the poetically twee names that Theo recited for the actual techniques to be grating.

"Muggles use push-ups and even one-handed push-ups to develop upper body strength," Theo continued. "But with magic, we can use it for more. Just like an incoming tide will wash up against a shoreline and then recede, we can use our internal magic to control and redirect our momentum, taking the force that drives us in one direction and then using it to push ourselves in another."

With that, Theo switched techniques. As he fell towards the earth, he caught himself with his left hand and then pushed himself up with even greater force so that his body was at a 45-degree angle to the ground. At his apex, he clapped three times before falling again only to catch himself with his right hand and repeat the process.

"And that's good for...?" Harry grunted. "Besides showing off, I mean?" At this point, he was still trying to achieve a basic one-handed push-up, and as he slowly lowered himself, the arm he was using shook from the strain.

"Once you're good at it, it will help with dodging. If you're moving in one direction, you can use the technique to instantly change your direction with no loss of momentum."

"Can... *you*... do... that?" Harry's face was now about six inches off the ground, and his left arm was shaking uncontrollably.

"Ha. I wish. Remus said it'll probably take a year or so of practice before I can use *Tides Flow and Recede* in a fight or something like that."

Harry didn't respond. Instead, with a loud grunt, he pushed himself up as hard as he could with his left hand and then tried to switch hands before he came back down again. He failed.

"GAH!" The boy exclaimed as he face-planted somewhat painfully. With a loud sigh, he pulled himself up into a sitting position.

"Okay, Theo. I admit this probably has some long-term benefit. And Merlin knows I need to be in better shape. But honestly? I'll pay you 100 galleons if I am ever in a situation where being able to do a one-handed push-up is going to be of the slightest benefit!"

Now...

And truthfully, Harry had still not mastered the art of Muggle-style one-handed push-ups, let alone doing them

with the magically-augmented physicality that Theo was only beginning to develop. But he *had* finally gotten the hang of supporting his body with one hand, which, at the moment, was all he needed.

The Slytherin ended the dilation and immediately opened a second thought-stream. One of his minds seized control of his left arm, causing it to swing around so that Harry could catch himself with his left hand before he could hit the ground. His other mind took control of his wand arm and began the wand movements for a Disarming Jinx even as that arm swung around towards his opponent. As Harry's left arm straightened to support his body far enough from the ground that spellcasting was legal, his right arm was suddenly pointing his wand straight at the startled Albert Yaxley, who'd assumed that the match was already won.

"EXPELLIARMUS !"

Yaxley tried to dodge, but it was too late. The spell hit him with enough force to knock him to the ground even as it sent his wand flying.

"Three points to two! Round and match to Black!" yelled the referee as the crowd went wild at Harry's extraordinary victory. Harry himself seemed amazed to have pulled out the win, and for a few seconds, he didn't notice the sudden aching in his left arm. But then, he came back to his senses and pointed his wand at his legs to cast the counter-curse before rising to his feet. He made his way to the center of the court and waited for Albert Yaxley to meet him. To Harry's surprise, the other boy seemed more amazed than angry over his unexpected loss.

"What the hell was that last move?!" Yaxley asked as he shook Harry's hand.

Harry shrugged casually. "Oh, just something I came up with on the spur of the moment," he said with a smile. Yaxley looked at him strangely but said nothing. As the referee joined them and held Harry's arm up, the Slytherin scanned the crowd for his friends. Most of them were cheering madly, but he noticed that Theo just stood with his arms crossed while bearing a smug expression.

"Yeah," Harry thought, "winning is nice, but the downside is that Theo will never let me hear the end of this. Plus, I owe him a hundred galleons! "

Next: Harry's Marseilles adventures continue, while news of his successes echo back home. Meanwhile, Fleur Delacour makes her move, while the Countess Zabini finally lays her cards on the table.

The next chapter is scheduled for October 1.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading):

The Methods of Humanity by local_doom_void (on AO3): In which Voldemort is restored to life in February of 1992 without anyone knowing. Surprisingly, the experience causes him to have a sudden midlife crisis and he realizes just how stupid an idea "becoming a Dark Lord" was, so he chucks it and becomes the new DADA professor under a fake

name. Currently up to Year 3. Warning: It's broken up into separate works rather than a chapter format and begins with "You Asked If I Were Happy."

The Ghost of Privet Drive by AndrewWolfe (also on AO3): This story just completed, but a sequel is supposedly coming. In the meantime, the author has started an unrelated story that I like but it's only one chapter in, so I'm not recommending just yet. Anyway, I was shocked at how much I like Ghost because it's a genre I normally hate: "real world Harry Potter fan somehow ends up inside the books where s/he fixes things." What makes this one unique and compelling is that the narrator isn't the usual young woman who thinks Draco is "cute but misunderstood." Instead, it's a 50-something lawyer, highly educated and well-versed in pop culture, who dies in a car wreck and is sent as a literal ghost to watch over Harry at Privet Drive. A very well-done "fix-it fic" with a surprising amount of inventive world-building.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: BlueWater, Bob, Crookshanks, Deaalethiae, Dr. Nemo, haDEs, haDEs, JCornell, johannesbit, kookooburro, Krisni, Maeve, Miss LeFay, Priest Of Judgement(Pivosh), ProgKingHughesker, Reveaio Stupido, Rubric of Ahriman, SlenderGnome, Teselecta, and TNT. Thanks, guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 15,213. Followers: 15,916. Favorites: 14,089. Communities: 226. Discord followers: Over 3608! Go Team POS!

AN5: "It was very good of God to let Carlyle and Mrs. Carlyle marry one another, and so make only two people miserable and not four" was a famous bon mot by Samuel Butler, adapted for use by our Blaise.

AN6: The first chapter of the Sinister Man's second novel, Strangers In Dallas, is available to \$5 patrons through my website and will be serialized at one chapter per month (until I'm done with it, at least, at which point updates will come faster). The second chapter will be posted on October 1.

AN7: Wear a mask! And if you're of age in the U.S., register to vote! And then, do it!

Speaking of Harry Black

Chapter 3: Speaking of Harry Black

Shameless plug! My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now for sale, and I am presently working on the sequel. Check out my website for more information:
<https://thesinisterman.com/home/>.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Harry Black

and the Resurrection Game

Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.

Chapter 3: Speaking of Harry Black

29 July 1994

4 Privet Drive

8:00 a.m.

Lily frowned menacingly at the misshapen eggs in the skillet in front of her. Her breakfast of choice was Eggs Benedict with a side of bacon, but she no longer had the benefit of a house elf, and even before her marriage, cooking had never been her strong suit. Her own mother, the late Rose Evans,

had been a rather good cook, but neither Lily nor Petunia had ever been interested in learning the skill. Hence the skillet full of rubbery scrambled eggs and burnt bacon. With a sigh, she transferred the food to three plates which she levitated over to the table with a flick of her wand.

James was already at the table, where he was reading that morning's Daily Prophet. He'd offered to help with the cooking, but Lily wanted to get the hang of it herself before teaching the Pureblood (who would be cooking for himself once school resumed) how to use the stove. He had mastered the electric toaster already (which he'd pronounced the most wonderful thing in the world), but Lily figured he'd need to be able to prepare more than toast by the end of August.

In response to her call, Jim came down the stairs in Gryffindor-themed pajama bottoms and a black t-shirt. She'd taken him clothes shopping a few weeks earlier, and Lily had been surprised that her normally outgoing son had taken to wearing lots of black. He also looked like he was still half-asleep, but none of the Potters had slept well in recent nights. With a loud yawn, the boy sat down at the small table and poured himself a glass of orange juice. He preferred pumpkin juice, but that simply wasn't available in the Muggle world. When he'd first asked a Muggle shop girl, she'd laughed at the idea that it was even possible to juice a pumpkin. And to be honest, Jim didn't know how pumpkin juice was made either. As he took a sip of orange juice, he opened the sports section of the Daily Prophet... and immediately almost choked on the liquid.

"What's the matter?" James asked in concern. Jim coughed for a few seconds to clear his throat.

"Have either of you read this?!" he exclaimed.

"I picked it up just before you came down," James replied,

"I read the news before I started breakfast," Lily added. "It seems Elias Hucksteen has just been elected Governor-General of the American Wizarding Confederation. He seems rather disagreeable, but he can't be any worse than the people running our government."

"I don't mean that!" Jim snapped. "I'm talking about the sports section!"

He slapped the paper down on the table and turned it so his parents could see the headline.

NOVICE DUELIST HARRY BLACK DOMINATES PARIS TOURNAMENT!

Below the headline, there was a moving picture of Harry's incredible come-from-behind victory over Albert Yaxley.

"Harry beat Yaxley's kid?" James said with an odd sort of pride. "Good for him!"

Jim was less pleased.

"Yeah, he beat Yaxley and won the tournament, along with a 100 Galleon prize! *And he used a Wu Xi Do move to do it!* "

"Really?" Lily asked. "How can you tell?"

"Pfft! Look at the picture! He's been practicing the *Tide Flows and Recedes* technique! I've been doing that for a year already!"

"Jim, calm down," James said. "Why are you so upset?"

"Aside from the fact that Wu Xi Do is *my* thing and Harry's using it to win tournaments, there's also the 100 Galleon

purse! I'm sure I could have beaten him if I'd been there, and we need 100 Galleons a lot more than he does!"

"Now Jim," Lily said. "You have enough to work on this summer without gallivanting off to France for something as silly as a dueling tournament. And *you* shouldn't be the one to worry about money. We'll be fine. We just need to... tighten our belts a bit."

The boy fumed silently for a moment while his parents looked at one another, concerned at his outburst. Neither of them knew whether his response was genuine jealousy over his former brother's success or the remnants of the Imperius which James had cast on him months before. They'd discussed trying to remove it, but Lily had never used the curse before in any capacity, and James was so inexperienced at it that he feared accidentally damaging his son's mind even more. And obviously, asking someone else to repair James's use of an Unforgiveable was out of the question.

After a few minutes of sullen silence, Jim finally spoke.

"Can I borrow Godric for a week or so, Dad? I'd like to owl a letter."

James crooked an eyebrow. "A letter? That will take a week? How far are you sending our poor owl."

"Um, basically halfway around the world. I just wanted to ask Remus Lupin when he's coming back to Britain."

James nodded and gave his son permission to send Godric off on a journey that might take a week or more, even for a post owl. The boy nodded and returned to his rubbery eggs. He did not mention that he had another reason for wanting to reach out to his mentor.

A raven-themed reason.

Meanwhile at Hogwarts...

"I see that congratulations are in order, Severus," Minerva McGonagall said cheerfully to her colleague as she sat down for breakfast. He looked quizzically in her direction.

"Really? And what for, dare I ask?"

"I believe Minerva is referring to the remarkable performance of one of your Slytherins, my boy," said Dumbledore, who sat between the two. He passed over the *Daily Prophet* sports section with its headline about Harry Black's extraordinary performance.

Snape scanned the article with mixed feelings. On one hand, he was justifiably proud of the success of a boy he'd considered a protégé. But on the other, he worried about the fact that the victory came at the expense of Corban Yaxley's son. He did not know the elder Yaxley even though they had both been Death Eaters back in the day. Indeed, he had not known that Yaxley (who was several years ahead of him during their school days) was a Death Eater until his exposure after the Dark Lord's fall. But he *did* know that House Yaxley was a cadet house to House Selwyn, and he was concerned that Harry was making some formidable enemies at a young age. Privately, he wished the boy would consider keeping a lower profile, as Snape himself had endeavored to do.

And then, as if reading Snape's mind, Dumbledore spoke again.

"Oh, and on an unrelated note, I have something for you."

With that, he produced a faded envelope which he handed over. Snape recognized the handwriting at once.

"The letter I spoke of many months ago that Damocles Belby left for you," Dumbledore said quietly. "I've reminded you twice of its existence, but you never came by my office to pick it up. So I thought I'd finally hand-deliver it."

Snape nodded as he took the missive, even as his own thoughts about "keeping a low profile" echoed in his head. When he left Belby's tutelage as one of the youngest Potions Masters in centuries, Snape had been on the cusp of international fame, at least within the Potioneers' community. Had he stayed on the continent and made use of the connections that Belby's reputation offered, he could have written his own ticket and become successful (and probably quite wealthy) on his own terms. Instead, he allowed himself to be seduced by the prospect of obtaining the Prince Lordship into supporting Voldemort, thus dooming himself with his own greed and hubris.

Luckily, at that moment, Flitwick spoke up from further down the table with some additional insights about Harry's proficiency as a duelist, and Snape quietly put the letter away in his pocket for later. Albus noticed but decided not to raise the issue again.

Meanwhile at the Burrow...

When Harry announced that he, Neville, Theo, and Justin would be jetting off to France for a "boys-only holiday," the girls who'd been taking Summer lessons with his study group decided that it was only fair for them to have a "girls sleepover" of their own. Molly Weasley was delighted when she heard the girls discussing the matter and volunteered

the Burrow, as there would be no "responsible adults" at Potter Manor. Sirius, who'd overheard the comment, started to object but then sheepishly admitted that she was probably right.

On June 27, the girls in question-Hermione, Amy, and Sue Lifflood to the Burrow where they were joined by Ginny and Luna Lovegood (who lived nearby). Space at the Burrow was at a premium, but Arthur had already borrowed a tent from his assistant, Perkins, which he'd erected the night before in the back yard. Enchanted with an Undetectable Expansion Charm, the tent had several rooms and was more than spacious enough for five witches.

Sue had agreed to provide the music in the form of a battery-powered CD player, complete with a mixtape from her sizeable collection of Muggle artists. The player, remarkably, worked perfectly fine so long as it was outdoors and far enough away from both the Weasley house and the magical tent. To Hermione's delight, Sue's father had modified a pair of communication mirrors so that one would totally absorb all the sound produced by the player and then transmit it to the other mirror inside the tent in a good approximation of Dolby sound, and Hermione peppered the Ravenclaw with questions about the spellwork involved.

As for the playlist, while Sue had a passionate love for industrial and goth-punk (she also insisted that The Cure's *Disintegration* was the greatest work in the history of Muggle music), for a girls-only sleepover, she decided to go with a "girl power" theme and so had burned a CD full of contemporary female Muggle singers like Madonna, Whitney Houston, Tori Amos, Lauren Hill, and Cher. The Pureblood girls were alternately enthralled and scandalized by the lyrics, but they all loved the singing. Privately, Ginny was simply glad that her mother couldn't hear the music inside

the tent, or she was sure the words "scarlet woman" would be used. Then again, she might use the same phrase anyway if she could hear how she and the other girls discussed the classmates they found "fanciable."

The other girls also took the opportunity to get to know the Ravenclaw a bit better. Sue Li was both a Halfblood and mixed-race: Chinese and British. Her father was Gordon Li, though Sue was certain he'd changed his name from something traditionally Chinese when his family moved to Great Britain. Sue's grandmother was a Pureblood Chinese witch, while her grandfather was a squib who nevertheless had received a magical education at Shamballa. He had told Sue tales of the famous wizarding city when she was a small child, but she'd never been there herself. Sue's mother was born Erica McMillan, a cousin from the poor relations of the Noble House of McMillan, which Sue's family proudly had nothing to do with (that was why the Ultimate Sanction never affected her). Gordon and Erica had been sorted into Ravenclaw together and married soon after graduation.

The next morning, the girls crowded around the magically expanded kitchen table for breakfast. They were joined by Arthur, Ron, and the Twins (both of whom had been threatened by Ginny with a horrific revenge if they did anything to disrupt the sleepover). While Arthur and Molly chatted amiably with the young witches-and Arthur peppered Hermione and Sue Li with questions about Muggle life to Ginny's embarrassment-the three boys were focused on the *Daily Prophet* instead.

"Bloody hell!" Fred exclaimed.

"What is it, son?" Arthur asked even as Molly lectured the boy on his language. In response, Fred simply held up the

front page of the sports section to show the headline and the animated picture of Harry's finishing move.

"Our ickle snakey friend just won his first dueling contest," Fred added. "And in impressive fashion, it seems."

Ron leaned over and looked closer at the moving picture.

"Huh," he said approvingly. "*Tide Flows And Recedes* Technique. Form needs work, though." Then, the boy returned to his eggs and sausage without any further interest.

The girls, on the other hand, were *very* interested, and all five of them crowded around to read the article. Discomfited, Fred handed the paper off to Hermione and then struggled to get through the gaggle of witches to move to another chair on the other side of his twin. While the girls giggled in excitement, he leaned in towards George.

"Does Harry Black have a harem now or something?" he whispered. George just shrugged.

"I dunno, Brother Mine. If he does, are you offended or just jealous?"

A brief discourse on Le Quartier Magique

and the History of Magical France

Le Quartier Magique was one of the Wizarding World's largest magical communities to be concealed inside a Muggle city. While not nearly as large or as populated as Shamballa, it was five times the size of Diagon Alley and its adjacent magical alleys. Between the Magic Quarter and the various magically concealed side-streets located elsewhere

in the city, Paris was home to about 9,000 wizards (almost a third of France's wizarding population) and about as many magically aware squibs. Largely, this was because French magicals, while respectful of the Statute of Secrecy, historically remained closer to the Muggle world than most magical nations. Sometimes, this was to their detriment. Gellert Grindelwald, for example, was known to despise Magical France precisely because he thought it "a nation of blood traitors," and he tried on two separate occasions to utterly destroy Paris for it.

Much of France's relaxed attitude towards Muggles could be traced back to the French Revolution. The Statute of Secrecy was still new, and French Muggleborns and Halfbloods who maintained connections with their Muggle kin were often swept up in their revolutionary fervor. Meanwhile, the more reactionary Pureblood wizards who still supported both the *Ancien Régime* and entrenched bigotry against those of "impure blood" fled France rather than risk the guillotine. For example, almost the entirety of the House of Lestrangle left for Britain, and no one in France seemed to miss them. In time, the Muggle Revolution faltered, leading to the Reign of Terror, the rise of Napoleon, and, eventually, restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. But by that point, the notions of *liberté, égalité, et fraternité* had taken hold among French magicals, as had the lessons of the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights. In 1804, the newly created *Assemblée Magique* ratified the French Declaration of Wizarding Rights. Decades later, the ICW would incorporate many (but not all) of its principles into its own charter.

Among the principles of the Declaration (one of the principles that was *not* adopted by the ICW) was that magic belonged to *all* of *les gens magiques*. Consequently, it was declared illegal in France for any individual wizard or family

of wizards to maintain exclusive ownership of any ley line convergences, all of which were declared the property of the *Assemblée* to be used for the benefit of all French wizards and witches. And so it was that most of the ancient wizarding manses, some of which had stood for a thousand years or more, were torn down, and the ley lines which fed them were altered by geomancy according to the *Assemblée*'s dictates. Others were left untouched but converted to other purposes. Beauxbatons, for example, was originally the opulent ancestral home of the wizarding branch of the House of Montmerancy, but by 1810, the notorious Montmerancys were all dead or in exile, and *L'Academie Magique* was relocated from its previous home in the Pyrenees to the former Montmerancy estate.

But the most impressive achievement of the *Assemblée Magique* was the divergence of no fewer than six ley lines so that they intersected at *La Rue Fantastique*, which was then just a hidden magical side-street comparable to Diagon Alley. Fueled by the raw magic of the ley lines that had been harnessed by powerful Arithmancy and complex runic arrays, the side-street was expanded into a town hidden within a city. *Le Quartier Magique* covered an area of nearly ten square miles contained within a space that represented less than 1000 square feet on a Muggle map. But while it was certainly possible for a wizard or witch to live their whole lives inside the confines of the Magic Quarter, most of the inhabitants were far more cosmopolitan than that, and Parisian magicals generally took pride in the fact that the Quarter was but one neighborhood within the City of Lights, one of the great cultural centers of the Muggle world. And while the Quarter prided itself on its fabulous hotels, museums, and restaurants, most Parisian magicals were happy to also take advantage of the amenities and entertainments available in Muggle France.

All of which goes to explain why there was a small kiosk across the street from L'Hotel St. Germain where one could purchase, among other things, tickets to Euro Disneyland Paris.

Le Quartier Magique

10:00 a.m. (local time)

As Malcolm Finch-Fletchley finished his purchases at the Euro Disney kiosk, he was surprised to see Harry Black sitting alone at a table in a nearby outside café. In front of Harry sat a butterbeer and a croque monsieur, neither of which had been touched. The boy was looking in his direction and clearly hoped Malcolm would join him. Intrigued, the Muggle elected to do so.

"Mr. Black," he said while taking his seat. "Might I ask what has you out here all alone?"

"The others are inside watching the Open Class prelims." Harry hesitated. "I... was hoping to talk to you alone, Sir Malcolm. About some financial questions. And... other things."

Malcolm ordered a cup of coffee and a croissant before answering. "Well, I'm not meeting Justin and Barbara for a while yet. Until then, I'd be happy to answer your questions about finance. And other things, I suppose."

The Slytherin finally took a sip of butterbeer while composing his thoughts.

"To begin with, I know from Lord Malfoy that he has... is diversified the right word?" The Muggle nodded. "Right. He's diversified his assets so that he has substantial holdings in

the Muggle world. And I know from Justin that your family plans to use House Prince as a way to invest your Muggle wealth within the Wizarding world. I was wondering if you could... I don't know, explain to me how all that works. I've suddenly become a very wealthy wizard but, as far as I've been told, there's not much to do with that wealth except just stick it in Gringotts Bank and let it collect dust."

"Good for you. I commend you for your interest in spreading your wealth beyond the magical community. Because frankly, Wizarding Britain is shockingly backwards in monetary matters, often in ways that defy my comprehension."

"How so?"

The Muggle considered the question as the waiter returned.

"Okay, let's start with Gringotts Bank. First of all, it's *not* a bank, at least not in the traditional sense. It offers very few of the services a Muggle bank would provide but also provides a wide variety of services that a Muggle bank would not offer and, in many countries, legally could not offer. You can store currency and other things there for a small fee, which is sort of like a safe deposit box, but really is more of a glorified storage unit. Money you deposit with Gringotts does not draw interest. Gringotts does not offer traditional mortgages nor indeed any other form of secured loan. They do offer very short-term unsecured loans at *usurious* interest rates with legally sanctioned violence as the penalty for default. And as the Goblin Treaties allow all that, they are effectively government-sanctioned loan sharks."

Malcolm paused to take a sip of coffee.

"Likewise, there are no Muggle banks that have the authority to *enforce* contracts on behalf of one party or another when they're not even a signatory. Muggle banks do not maintain staffs of cursebreakers who are sent around the world to locate and *loot* tombs, claiming any relics inside on behalf of the bank. And most of all, Muggle banks do not verify one's lineage, they aren't responsible for resolving inheritance disputes, they don't execute wills as a matter of course, and they *certainly* don't certify in a legally binding manner that individuals are entitled-regardless of age-to claim seats on the nation's ruling legislative body! In the Muggle world, inheritance matters are handled through the judiciary, but Wizarding Britain has, for reasons that elude me, simply... *delegated* all those vital responsibilities to the Goblins... while *also* maintaining a continually hostile and bigoted relationship with them. It's really quite baffling."

Harry nodded slowly as he absorbed all that. All this time, he had taken the concept of "Gringotts Bank" for granted, but now he wondered exactly what Gringotts was and why the wizards put up with it.

"So how are you handling Justin's money?"

"The Prince money we're leaving in place for the moment. We've discussed with Severus the possibility of investing in a new apothecary in Hogsmeade and hiring some of his former students who have been unable to secure work as potioners with existing firms due to... *blood status* ." Malcolm's voice dripped with condescension on those last two words.

"We've also quietly opened a small vault-in Barbara's name since Justin's somewhat unique status elevates her to being considered a squib-and had about 10,000 pounds converted into Galleons to store. Mainly so that we can try to figure out

how the hell the exchange rate works. That's another thing. Unlike Gringotts, Muggle banks *do not* have a monopoly on the printing of currency, nor are they responsible for setting the rate of exchange with other currencies. And then, there's this."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a single galleon and then a gold money clip from which he removed a wad of cash. He handed them both over to Harry, who noticed that the money clip bore the crest of the Dukedom of Forgill.

"Which of those is heavier?" the Muggle asked.

Harry hefted one item in each hand. "The money clip by a little bit, I think. But they're pretty close to the same."

"I concur. Now what interests me is this: I am assured by the Goblins that the Galleon is pure gold, whatever that means in magical terms, while the money clip is 24K gold, which is as pure as Muggles can make it. And yet, the Galleon is worth about £5 sterling, while the money clip retails at £750 and, if melted down, would still be worth about £400 as just a lump of gold. In theory, one could simply convert £5 into one Galleon, melt the Galleon down into gold, and then sell it for about £400. Multiply that by, say £10,000 converted to Galleons, and you could make millions through currency manipulation."

"So why has no one ever done that?" Harry asked, amazed at the implications of this.

"Well for one thing, Galleons can't be melted down. I know, I've tried. And with a blowtorch, no less. All it got me was a hot Galleon and an angry owl from Gringotts advising me that attempts to manipulate the integrity of Gringotts-issued currency would invoke 'severe penalties.' Understandably, I

won't be trying that again until I find out more about how wizarding economics work."

He chuckled. "Which is why I put up with Lucius Malfoy's eccentricities. In the meantime, we're focusing on looking for investment opportunities, though we're taking it slow as we don't want to step on any Ancient and Noble toes, as it were."

Harry thought for a moment. "Sir Malcolm. Are you aware of the fact that the Wizarding World has no commercially available magic that functions as video-recording technology? That is, of a sort that's comparable to TV cameras?"

Malcolm snorted. "I am aware that they have the Wizarding Wireless-so-called because it doesn't actually have any wires in it at all. And that the most common form of entertainment consists of sitting around said Wizarding Wireless while listening to news reports, insipid radio soap operas, and appallingly bad music."

The discussion suddenly gave Malcolm a flashback to the first time he had heard Celestina Warbeck singing "*A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love*," which he'd first assumed was a deliberate parody of Shirley Bassey since the tune was obviously cribbed from "*A Foggy Day In London Town*." He shuddered at the memory.

"As far as visual recording goes, I know that omnioculars sell for 30 Galleons, don't have sound, can't hold more than two hours of video footage, and can't store that for more than a week. Have I forgotten anything."

"Speaking hypothetically," Harry said casually, "if someone invented a kind of magical video camera capable of floating under its own power, moving at the user's direction, and

recording up to twelve hours of both video and sound that can then be transferred to a storage medium, would that sound like something you'd be interested in investing in?"

Malcolm studied the boy carefully while rubbing his chin. "Hypothetically? Yes, I very much would be interested. Do you have a hypothetical prototype?"

"Hypothetically, yeah. We're hoping to have several ready by the Quidditch World Cup so that we can record the matches and perhaps resell them. Of course, I have no idea about the legality of recording the Cup without permission, so we're taking it slow."

Malcolm chuckled. "From what I've seen, wizarding intellectual property rights are absurd, but if you don't object, I'll consult with Lucius about it."

"No objections from me. If we're going to have this ready to go by the time the Cup starts, we'll probably need all the help we can get."

"Understood, I hope I speak for Justin when I say I look forward to working with you."

Harry's eyes widened slightly at that, and he hesitated before responding. Malcolm noticed.

"Perhaps," the Muggle said gently, "this might be a good time to segue into those *other things*. "

Harry nodded and took a deep breath. "Forgive me for being so direct, Sir Malcolm, but... what do you think of me? As a person, I mean?"

Malcolm nodded and chose his words carefully. "I must admit... when we first met, I didn't much care for you. In

fact, I disliked you rather intensely. So much so that we forbade Justin to participate in your summer lessons program and only allowed him to come visit the Zabinis if we could come along. But then, when I met you at the airport, I felt none of that prior dislike. And over the past few days, my views have done a complete 180. I now find myself quite impressed with you and quite grateful for the positive influence you've had on my son. Barbara feels exactly the same way."

He paused to take a sip of coffee.

"Can I assume that *magic* was involved in my altered feelings?" he said mildly. Harry grimaced.

"You can. I... don't know what it was exactly. It's... been an issue... well, for a long time. And if it's all the same, I'd rather not get into the details. But... I went through... some stuff at the end of last term, and now it seems to be dormant. Or at least *resting*. "

"Seems to be?"

Harry shrugged. "There's no practical way of testing it except for walking up to a Muggle to see if he snarls at me."

"Hmm," said Malcolm thoughtfully. "Then I suppose we shall treat this Sunday as a test of sorts."

"Sunday?" Harry asked.

"Yes," the man said as he reached into his pockets to pull out a brown envelope. "It was supposed to be a birthday surprise from Justin, but I suspect now you'd want to know in advance what you're getting into. I purchased tickets for our entire group to Euro Disney."

Harry's eyes widened, as Malcolm continued.

"I understand if you have reservations about going in light of what you just told me. But if you think this phenomenon is now dormant, this might be a good way to find out for sure. If you can make it through a day at a Disney theme park just jam-packed with Muggles, I would think that solid evidence that the effect has ended."

The boy's eyes lit up. The Dursleys once took Dudley to Euro Disney while he got left behind with the cat lady for three days. He'd *dreamt* of seeing the park for himself.

Harry smiled and thanked his future business partner for the generous gift.

Elsewhere in Le Quartier Magique...

"Seriously," Alexander Nott deadpanned. "You got remarried? And didn't even let me know in advance?"

"To be perfectly frank, boy," sneered Alex's father, "I assumed that if you came, you'd have caused some sort of ridiculous spectacle. And I would not see my bride embarrassed on her wedding day by your childishness."

Alex laughed. "Oh, I would never have come to your wedding, Father. I'm just astonished I had to read about it in the newspapers! You could have at least sent me an owl."

"Ha! I wasn't sure you knew what owls were! You haven't sent me one since last summer!"

"No, I haven't. That damnable Ultimate Sanction might have made me hate Theo, but it did *nothing* to affect my contempt for *you* !"

Tiberius snarled and his hand twitched towards his wand. Alex did likewise. But before spellfire could erupt, a silvery voice called out, instantly seizing the attention of both men.

"Boys, boys, boys," cooed Narcissa Nott. "Please do show some decorum. We are all family now, after all."

"Biologically, I suppose," Alex muttered without taking his eyes of his father. "And not even that in your case."

"Tosh, dear boy," she continued. "My cozy little Parisian apartment has several bedrooms. Why don't you withdraw to one of them and calm yourself? We can discuss these matters later over dinner."

"I regret, Lady Nott, that I have other plans." Alex lifted his chin defiantly. "I'm only in Paris to watch some of my friends from school in the dueling tournament at the St. Germain. I will be staying with them. I found out about your presence here merely through happenstance."

Then, he took a step forward towards Tiberius. "And I have also found out that Theo No-Name is in Paris as well. I hope for your sake, Father, that you have not chosen Paris as a honeymoon spot as part of some plot against him. Your Unbreakable Vow still stands."

"As does yours, brat!" Tiberius responded "And do not presume that your Heirship will protect you from my wrath if you continue to defy me!"

"Tiberius!" Narcissa said sharply. Then, she put a hand on her new husband's shoulder and all the fight seemed to drain out of him. She turned her gaze towards Alex.

"Alexander, I assure you. We had no idea that Theo No-Name would be in Paris at this time. We chose this as our

honeymoon spot because I happened to own this apartment here in the Magic Quarter. We have no intention of acting against your... former brother and his friends."

Alex glared at her for her reference to his "former" brother, but she turned back to Tiberius and kissed him on the cheek.

"Tiberius, darling. Why don't you step into another room for a few moments and let me talk with your... with *our* son."

Tiberius quivered. "Of... of course, my love."

Alex shuddered at the display, while his father stiffly exited the room. Narcissa regarded Alex almost indulgently, as if his outbursts had been nothing but a child's tantrum. She moved closer to him.

"Oh, Alex. You must not provoke your father so. Despite your anger, we are still a family. Indeed, now that I am a part of your family, I hope I can provide a... mediating influence between you and your father."

She reached up and gently caressed his cheek. "It's been so long, hasn't it, since you've had someone to call *Mother* ."

Suddenly, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand away with a snarl. "My mother was Christina Fenwick Nott. And she is *irreplaceable* ."

He took a step back and regarded the witch coldly. "And you should probably be warned: The Durmstrang Dark Arts curriculum includes learning how to resist *your allure* !"

Narcissa's gentle motherly façade fell away to be replaced with an icy mask. "You do not know of what you speak, Alexander."

The young man sniffed disdainfully. "Once again, I wish you happiness in your nuptials. May you be *exactly* the kind of wife my father deserves. Now, if you will excuse me, my friends are waiting for me."

Without another word, he turned and stalked towards the door to the apartment. But before he could grab the handle, Narcissa spoke again.

"I do wonder, Alexander, whether your resistance to my charms is truly the result of a Durmstrang education. Or perhaps there is another reason."

Alex did not respond nor even turn around. He simply yanked the door open and departed. Narcissa sighed petulantly.

"A pity," she thought to herself. *"Turning the Nott Heir right now would have greatly simplified things later."*

Then, she placed her hand gently against her stomach. *"It is fortunate that before too long, another option for Tiberius's Heir will present itself."*

That afternoon back at Hogwarts...

If Severus Snape was more open about his feelings, he might have admitted to Dumbledore his trepidation about reading what Damocles Belby had to say to him and about him. In his shame over his actions as a Death Eater, Snape never sought to speak to Belby prior to the man's death just a few years after the Dark Lord's fall. He'd been too afraid that someone he respected so much would condemn him for his sins and, worse, for his wasted potential. While Dumbledore assumed that the letter contained praise from the deceased Master, Snape was less optimistic and almost frightened of

what message Belby might have left for him from beyond the grave.

The envelope sat unopened on Snape's desk for most of the day as he continually found excuses to procrastinate. Finally, late that afternoon, he simply ran out of things to do. Then, annoyed at his own timidity, he took a moment to analyze his own feelings and use his Occlumency to organize and fetter them. Reluctantly, he sat down at the desk and opened the envelope. Inside were four pages of parchment in Belby's familiar handwriting, along with a much smaller mini-envelope that was about 4x6 inches in size. On the front of the mini-envelope were the words "Read the letter first." With a shrug, Snape set the smaller envelope aside and began to read Damocles Belby's final words for him.

When he finished the missive, he read it again... *slowly* .

After finishing his second read-through, Snape leaned back in his chair and rubbed his hands across his face. He picked up the smaller envelope to open it, but then he hesitated. For nearly a minute, he simply stared at it, as if opening it up might be like opening Pandora's Box, a decision that for good or ill could never be undone. The former Death Eater took a deep breath before setting the small envelope aside. Then, he summoned a bottle of firewhisky from his quarters along with a glass big enough for a double-shot, which he promptly downed without hesitation.

After the burn had faded from his throat, Snape read through the last paragraph of Belby's letter one final time before wadding the entire thing into a ball which he threw towards the center of the room. "**INCENDIO!**" The letter was incinerated in midair, leaving only a fine ashy powder to land on the floor, and even that was quickly vanished.

"*Honestly,* " the spy thought to himself as he reached for the bottle once more while glaring balefully at the tiny sealed envelope. "*Sometimes, I think the life I've led is just... ridiculous!* "

That night, back in Paris...

For Harry and his friends, the Open Class finals were electrifying: 16 teen duelists, most of whom were as far above the Novice Champion as he was from the average Hogwarts First Year. Of course, that would change in time. By virtue of winning the Novice Championship, Harry would automatically advance to Open Class when next he set foot on a dueling floor. And to succeed at *that*, Harry would need to nearly double the list of competition-approved spells he had memorized. He was quite looking forward to it.

But that was for the future. The rest of Harry's summer was booked up, and he would have until Christmas at least to prepare himself for Open Class competition. For now, he was content to watch and learn from his future peers. Giles Yaxley was every bit as fearsome a competitor as Harry had anticipated, but there were others just as impressive. Petrovich and Zedescu from Durmstrang. St. Yves, Machado, and Delacour from Beauxbatons. And even the two Americans, Sinclair and Madison, who had both just graduated from the Blacksburg Magery Institute, Wizarding America's equivalent to West Point or Sandhurst.

Fleur Delacour (Blaise's mysterious "acquaintance") made it to the semifinal round before unexpectedly losing 3-2 to Olga Zedescu. It was *very* unexpected in Harry's eyes. While Zedescu was an imposing and aggressive duelist (Harry found the way she snarled her incantations to be quite intimidating), Delacour was far more graceful and precise.

Indeed, after Delacour won the first two rounds handily, Harry had expected her to move on easily to the finals. But then, the girl's dueling coach, who Blaise helpfully identified as Fleur's mother, Apolline Delacour, called for a time-out. There was a brief exchange between mother and daughter, at the conclusion of which, Fleur looked decidedly angry. Whether that anger was why she proceeded to go down in three straight rounds to her Durmstrang rival was unclear, but Harry had his theories. The first two losses were subtle enough to pass without comment, but when Fleur very deliberately stepped into the path of a Disarming Jinx that she should have dodged easily, Harry couldn't help but notice.

Giles Yaxley also went down in the semi-final round, and so Harry had no personal knowledge of either of the two finalists beyond what he'd picked up from gossip. Olga Zedescu was a Romanian dueling prodigy and the daughter of an Auror from Bucharest. The American, Randolph Sinclair, had obtained the rank of Mage-Lieutenant in the Junior Regimental Officer Corps before graduating from Blacksburg the previous term. He would be among the fourth generation in the Sinclair family to serve as an officer in the Confederation's wizarding military. The duel between Zedescu and Sinclair was fast paced but still took a good ten minutes to complete, with Zedescu finally defeating her American rival.

But while all eyes were on the gold and silver medalists, Harry's attention remained focused on the girl from Beauxbatons who he was pretty sure had just deliberately thrown a semifinals match.

Later...

After the conclusion of the Open Class finals, everyone moved from the Grand Ballroom to one of the hotel's restaurants, which had been reserved for a reception for all the Open Class and Novice competitors. As a minor celebrity due to his own championship, Harry found himself with no shortage of people who wanted to make his acquaintance and even get his autograph.

"I wonder if this is what Jim feels like whenever a new Boy Who Lived book comes out," he thought to himself even as he placed his signature onto an Official Tournament Program™. He made his way through the throng to approach Fleur Delacour, although he wasn't completely sure why. On one hand, he felt an odd attraction to the older girl, but at the same time, he found something about her to be mildly off-putting. He was only slightly surprised when Blaise suddenly appeared right next to him, apparently eager to make the introductions.

"If I may, Harry," he said before turning to Delacour. "Mademoiselle Delacour, please allow me to introduce Hadrian Remus Black Lord Wilkes. Harry, may I present to you, Mademoiselle Fleur Delacour of the Paris Delacours."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mademoiselle Delacour. But please, call me Harry."

She looked down at him (and Fleur Delacour was at least five inches taller than Harry) in bemusement.

"Ah, but of course!" Delacour said with an exuberant smile tinged with a hint of smugness. "You are zee leetle boy who won zee Novice competition! To be so talented at such a young age! Très magnifique!"

Harry winced slightly at being referred to as "zee leetle boy" but decided to let it pass. Almost. He also noticed that

Delacour had *not* invited him to use *her* first name.

"Thank you. And your own performance was most impressive. I felt sure you had Zedescu all taken care of, but regrettably, she was able to make a comeback."

The smile faded slightly. "Zo she was. I 'ave dueled Zedescu before. She eez..." Fleur paused and gestured with her hands as if struggling for the words. "She eez... *la plus formidable*. As you progress from Novice to *la Classe Ouverte* and become more experienced, you shall learn never to underestimate any opponent."

"... I'll try to remember that," Harry said archly. "Of course, one thing I've truly enjoyed about attending this tournament-aside from winning my own bracket, of course-is having the chance to meet great duelists such as yourself and learn from your experience and techniques."

Fleur's laugh glittered. "*Comme vous etes charmant!* Please! Ask your questions, *s'il vous plaît!*"

Between them, Blaise stood silently, and he looked back and forth as if suddenly aware that he was standing between two predators, but he no longer knew who was hunting whom. Harry took a half-step closer so that only Fleur and Blaise could hear.

"You're very kind, Mademoiselle Delacour," he began with a respectful bow of his head. "But mainly, I was simply curious about your last round. Why *did* you step to *the right* and move directly into the path of Zedescu's jinx? You'd done a flawless job of reading her moves up until then. In fact, it almost looked like you had to change direction to move into the path of that spell that otherwise would have missed you completely."

Now, it was Fleur's turn to take a half-step closer to Harry, and while her smile was still charming, there was a flash of something dangerous in her eyes that made Blaise swallow hard.

"*Tu es sérieux ?*" she exclaimed. "Do you mean to accuse me of... *comment dites-vous en Anglais* ... throwing zee match? *Absurde !*"

She laughed again, and as she did, both Blaise and Harry felt something unnatural wash over them. It was something that would have turned most young men their age into babbling fools. Blaise, who had known Fleur Delacour for years, was prepared for it and trained to resist it.

And Harry... was simply Harry. For just a few seconds, his eyes seemed to glaze slightly, but then, he shook his head once sharply before studying the French girl again with a more discerning and cautious eye.

"Absurd?" he said quietly. "Perhaps. But I *really do* think that you intentionally threw the match with Zedescu."

Then, Harry gave the girl his most intimidating smile. "Just as I also believe that your English is *much* better than you would have me believe."

Fleur's own smile faded instantly.

"Oh, and by the way," he continued, "that thing that you're doing? I'd appreciate if you stopped."

With that comment, the girl's eyes widened in surprise. "Zat... *thing* I'm doing?" She glanced quickly at Blaise who merely shrugged his shoulders as if to say "*don't look at me. I didn't say anything.*"

"Yes," Harry said amiably. "*That thing* . I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. So please stop it. Or I might mistake your intentions, Mademoiselle Delacour. And I'm sure neither one of us would want that."

Fleur said nothing at first, but over the next few seconds, her strange aura receded, and in response, Harry's heart rate returned to normal. Then, she turned to Blaise and smiled. It was the first genuine smile Harry had seen on her face all day.

"Well, well, well," Fleur said in flawless English laced with a barely detectable French accent. "My congratulations, Blaise. Your friend had my curiosity. And now... he has my *attention* ."

Then, without another word, Fleur turned and disappeared into the crowd.

"Let me guess," Harry said before taking another sip of champagne. "You can't say anything else until your Mum has read my cards, right?"

Blaise nodded as he watched Fleur Delacour rejoin her mother and leave the reception.

Meanwhile nearby...

Theo had just snatched another few deviled eggs off a server's tray when he heard a familiar voice behind him.

"Careful, Theo," Alex said. "You always get sick when you eat too many deviled eggs, no matter how much you love them."

The Slytherin turned around in surprise, almost choking on the hors d'oeuvre he'd just popped into his mouth. He swallowed quickly and downed his champagne before finally addressing his former brother.

"Alex! I didn't know you were here. Was it because of... the wedding?"

Alex scoffed. "Of course not. They didn't tell me in advance either. Olga Zedescu and Stanislav Petrovich are good friends of mine, and they invited me to the tournament as their guest. I didn't know you'd be here either, but I'm glad to see you, even if..."

He trailed off lamely, and Theo nodded in sympathy.

"So... the Ultimate Sanction is done," Theo said. "Where does that leave us?"

The older boy took a deep breath. "Well, you're still expelled from the family, so you're still legally Theo *No-Name*. I'm under a vague yet persistent compulsion that stops me from recognizing you as my brother or even showing any overt signs of affection."

He laughed bleakly. "I... hated you for all those months. For no reason except stupid magic and a cruel idiot's pettiness. And then, it ended one day, and suddenly, I *didn't* hate you anymore. Ever since, I've been waiting to meet up with you somewhere and pull you into a big hug. But now that we're both here, I can't quite bring myself to do it. How awful is that?! To curse one of your sons so that he can't even hug his own... his *former* brother."

Theo shrugged. "What can I say? We're descended from an unspeakable prick. Will you think bad of me for saying I hope Narcissa kills him during sex?"

"Yes! That means I'll be stuck alone with her! She's been my mother for less than a day and she's already tried hitting on me!"

"Ewww! Seriously?!"

"Yeah. By the way, I'm pretty sure she's got veela allure, which explains why Father is acting like he's going through puberty again. It's disgusting."

"Veela... allure?"

Alex grimaced. "There's a... a thing you can do. Most wizards consider it dark magic, but not necessarily. I guess it kind of depends on whether you consider Veela to be people or not. Anyway, you can harvest certain organs from a live Veela and use them to make a potion that can make a witch supernaturally attractive. That's how Narcissa got her hooks into Father, I suppose."

Theo nodded. "So, um, you don't think Tiberius is going to try for another Heir, do you?"

Alex shrugged dismissively. "Honestly, I hope he does. He can't Sanction me, and I don't even know if I'd mind getting kicked out of the family. But it'll be a while if they go that route. At least nine months to give birth, and then, it has to be a male, and *then*, it'll take a few years to show magic. I'm pretty sure I can finish my Mastery by then, and after that, the bastard can disown me for all I care."

The reunion was interrupted when Giles Yaxley, who was one of Alex's classmates, walked over.

"Nott, old bean. Father is taking me, Albert, and some of our friends out to *Le Chabanaïs* to celebrate our part of the tourney being over. You're welcome to join us."

Alex demurred. "Thank you for the invitation, Yaxley. But I have already made other plans."

"Eh. Your loss. You know how those French birds are though, what!" Then, with a rude laugh, Yaxley turned and left.

"Friend of yours?" Theo asked.

Alex sighed. "No, but he's not really an enemy... or at least not yet. I'm hoping to keep it that way until after graduation."

"Well, he invited you to dinner with his family, so that's something. Is *Le Chabonais* a good restaurant?"

Alex coughed and blushed slightly. "To be honest, it's not really a restaurant at all. More of a... well, a bordello."

Theo's eyes widened. "I'm not sure whether an invitation to a place like that counts as a sign of friendship or not."

Later in the Delacour Suite...

Fleur scrubbed angrily at her makeup while her mother gently combed her hair into tightly woven French braids.

"Something troubles you, daughter?" Apolline asked, although she already knew the answer to the question. Fleur had been angry since "losing" her match against Zedescu. She had already removed her dueling clothes and was now wearing form-fitting jet-black trousers and some rather specially enchanted boots, though her top consisted of the witch's equivalent to a Muggle sports bra. The rest of her ensemble for the evening was on the bed waiting for her.

Fleur glared at her own reflection in the mirror. "I could have beaten her, Mama," she said with quiet intensity. "You know I could have. Her and the American both."

"Could have? Yes. But should have? You know better than that, *Chérie*."

By now, Apolline had finished braiding her daughter's hair and simply rested her hands on the girl's shoulders.

Fleur rose angrily. "Do I, Maman? I have done everything you and Papa have asked. I never went out for Quidditch. For seven years, I have strictly maintained a class placement between 10th and 15th, though I could easily have scored much higher. I have the skills to be a champion duelist, but I have never been *allowed* to finish better than *fourth*. I'm seventeen and not even permitted to *date*. It's not fair!"

With a huff, the girl rose from her chair and snatched up the black long-sleeve top and pulled it on while her mother looked at her sadly.

"No, *Chérie*, it is not fair. But you know why it is necessary. You know what secrets we Delacours hold and why, and that one of those secrets is *you*. You *and* your sister. You cannot draw too much attention to your abilities or we shall all pay the price."

The mother picked up the last item of clothing from the bed, a small black cloth, which she held out for Fleur.

"We both know, Fleur, that you deserve a place in the sun. But the family needs you. *France* needs you. And so, for a while longer at least, you must continue to hide in the shadows."

Fleur said nothing to that. She simply snatched the black balaclava from her mother's hand and pulled it on over her forehead.

Meanwhile, there was a soft ding from the mirror that sat on the nightstand. Apolline picked it up and tapped it twice while, behind her, Fleur angrily pulled on a pair of black leather gloves. A man's voice could be heard emanating from the mirror.

"They've just entered *Le Chabonais*. You've got two hours, three at the most."

Apolline turned to her daughter and nodded. Fleur sniffed disdainfully before pulling the balaclava all the way down to cover her face and then adjusting the enchanted night vision goggles that came with it.

"*Allons enfants de la patrie*, " she muttered ruefully under her breath as she headed for the balcony.

Moments later, a shadow as black as night climbed onto the balcony ledge before jumping easily from one balcony to the next. Within seconds, Fleur had made her way to the gap between balconies where the hotel's exterior glass lift ascended and descended. After a short wait, the lift stopped on the fifth floor, and she took the opportunity to gently step onto its roof. The lift resumed its ascent, and soon its hidden passenger reached her destination, a recessed area at the top where the machinery that powered the lift was concealed. Carefully, she braced her hands against one wall and her feet against the one opposite. Moments later, the lift began its descent, and Fleur Delacour was left suspended in midair atop a 10-story lift shaft.

Unperturbed, Fleur turned her attention to the far end of the hotel where a large flagpole bearing the flag of Magical

France strutted out perpendicular to the building. She pointed her wand at the end of the pole. "**CARPE RETRACTUM!**" Instantly, a thin rope shot out of the end of her wand to wrap around the pole. She jumped away from her position in the open-air lift shaft and allowed the magic of the conjured rope to reel her in towards the flagpole, which she caught easily with her free hand. Effortlessly, she pulled herself up and then tightrope walked along the flagpole to the edge of the building before dropping down onto the balcony below.

Instantly, Fleur Disillusioned herself. Her jet-black infiltration suit should have made it impossible for anyone to observe her activities, but she was not one for foolish risks while on the job. The "easy part" of the evening over, the girl knelt at the door connecting the balcony to the hotel room and cast several spells to reveal the runes which maintained the high-level security wards for which the top floor suites of L'Hotel St. Germain were renowned. It took nearly ten minutes to bypass them (which, by Fleur's standards, was a frightfully long time), but after that, she was inside.

Before stepping too far into the room, however, Fleur reached up to her goggles and tapped them three times. Instantly, every magical or enchanted item in the room was lit in a soft glow. The girl smiled. As she'd expected, her target would have placed his strongest defenses on his most valuable possessions and, in the process, given away the location of those possessions to anyone with the means to sense magic directly. It took only a few more minutes to neutralize the protective wards and open the closet door. Hanging inside was just what she was looking for: a long coat of the kind favored by British Aurors and hit wizards. And still affixed to the lapel was a brass badge that read "*Corban Yaxley, Director, Department of Magical Law Enforcement.*"

Fleur carried the badge over to a nearby desk and set to work. After half an hour spent carefully removing the back of the badge, she produced a sheet of parchment bearing a very complicated rune sequence, which she proceeded to etch onto the piece she had removed with silvery tool created especially for that purpose. The etching took another hour, and when she finished, she pulled a small mirror from a pocket and tapped it three times.

"Sparrow to Nest. Ready for transmission test."

"Proceed," said the male voice that had spoken to Apolline earlier. Fleur set the mirror aside and spoke directly into Yaxley's badge.

"'Allo, 'allo, all you British chaps," Fleur said in a parody of a British upper-class accent. "This is Corban Yaxley, Death Eater and all-around baddy, speaking to you live from his overpriced hotel room in beautiful Paris, France! I can't answer your call right now, as I'm probably out murdering a Muggleborn or something."

"Communication received loud and clear," said the voice from the mirror. "Though I'm not sure that a Death Eater's hotel room is the right place to engage in such levity, my dear."

"Well, Papa," Fleur said crisply. "Since I am the one *risking my life by breaking into* the Death Eater's hotel room, I think I shall be the one to decide whether levity is appropriate, *non ?*"

There was a pause. "You're mad at me over having to throw the dueling tournament, aren't you, pumpkin?"

"Furious," she answered drily, "but not so much that I'll go off target during a mission. Now hush, so that I can finish

this. It's been a long day, and I wish to have a hot bath and go to bed."

There were a few seconds of deep laughter. "That's my little Mata Hari. I'll make it up to you someday, I promise."

Twenty minutes later, Yaxley's DMLE badge was back in one piece and hanging once more on the man's long coat. Fleur took another ten minutes to search the rest of the suite, just in case. Her thoroughness was rewarded when she discovered a locked and magically sealed attaché case, which she opened without difficulty. There appeared to be little of any interest, mainly security arrangements about something called a "Triwizard Tournament," whatever that was. Fleur reviewed it all as thoroughly as time would permit. Others would analyze the intelligence later from her Pensieve memories.

Ninety minutes after that, Corban Yaxley and his two sons entered their suite, all in varying degrees of intoxication and, in Albert's case, flush with the experience of having lost his virginity at fifteen in Magical Paris's most famous brothel. Naturally, there was no sign that anyone had been in their rooms in their absence.

Fleur Delacour had been thoroughly trained in espionage, after all. Like her mother before her.

Next: Harry's Marseilles trip wraps up with an eventful visit to Euro Disney, and then, the Countess lays her cards on the table. The next chapter is scheduled for October 25.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story

as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P*n page and supported my original fiction. At the \$5+ level, you get free previews of Strangers In Dallas. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading):

That Glorious Strength by the always interesting Lomonaaeren: In 1945, Tom Riddle reveals both his Gaunt ancestry and his Parseltongue to his fellow Slytherins... who don't really care very much that the orphaned Halfblood son of a Muggle and an inbred squib from a destitute old family can talk to snakes. He still has dirty blood, after all. Forty-five years later, Headmaster Riddle of the Fortius Academy shows up at 4 Privet Drive to invite Harry Potter to his school... and to his revolution against the Purebloods.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: Alexs, Aza, Bob, ciccj, Crookshanks, Dr. Nemo, durlic, Espresso Patronum, haDEs, kean, Krisni, Mr Störtebeker, obber, Priest Of Judgement(Pivosh), ProgKingHughesker, Pyunik, RamsesZwei, Rena Downs, Rubric of Ahriman, Sakkiko, skyrmion, the lemonduck, TNT, and vaibhavi. Thanks, guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 15,370. Followers: 16,092. Favorites: 14,277. Communities: 229. Discord followers: Over 3692! Go Team POS!

AN5: "You had my curiosity. Now you have my attention." is an anachronism from the 2012 film Django Unchained. When I gave a tweaked version to Fleur as a line, I'd thought it was older than that, but apparently not. Oh well. Blacksbury Magery Institute is from the *Alexandra Quick* series. I do hope Inverarity does not object to me suggesting

that POS perhaps shares a universe with AQ. Fleur's "'allo, 'allo" was a brief homage to, well, 'Allo, 'Allo!

AN6: Wear a mask! And if you're of age in the U.S., register to vote! And then, do it!

Happy Birthday, Harry and Jim!

Chapter 4: Happy Birthday, Harry and Jim!

Shameless plug! My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now for sale, and I am presently working on the sequel. Check out my website for more information:
<https://thesinisterman.com/home/>.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Harry Black

and the Resurrection Game

Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.

Chapter 4: Happy Birthday, Harry and Jim!

The Front Lawn of Potter Manor

30 July 1994

As Jim Potter surveyed the house that had been his home for just shy of fourteen years, his stomach churned with mixed emotions. For the first time in his life, Jim was on this property *as a guest*.

"No, not a guest, " he thought ruefully. "*I'm here as the entertainment!* "

Despite all the many reversals the Potter family had suffered over the last few months, Jim Potter's birthday remained a national holiday, and the Jim Potter Birthday Gala™ was still one of the most important charity events of the year. Only now, the charitable trust that had been set up in Jim's name was no longer under the control of the Potter family but rather a Board of Directors picked by *Harry Black*. And the newly appointed Board had already begun making changes, one of which was that this year's Gala would be held on July 30 since it was a Saturday. Another was that the event and the grounds were open to the public (though the house itself was locked up tight) instead of invitation-only. Security for the event was stringent, but Jim was still uncomfortable to see so many people on the grounds of his family's former estate that his parents would never have allowed inside the wards if they'd still been in charge of things.

"*At least none of them can get into the house,*" the birthday boy muttered to himself as Lord Parkinson, a known Death Eater, strolled by nonchalantly.

In addition to its usual offering to St. Mungo's, this year's gala was also set to raise funds for the ongoing repairs to the Ministry complex needed after Pettigrew and Rookwood's dramatic escape and also to provide financial support to the families of those who were killed or seriously cursed by the Death Eaters in the same incident. Both of Jim's parents were also in attendance, but this year, James wasn't the host. Rather, he was part of *the security*.

Unlike Jim's more recent birthdays, few of his friends were on hand. The Weasleys were all here-in fact, so far this year, the Weasleys had spent more time at Potter Manor than Jim himself-but for the most part, they were helping Molly in the kitchen with preparing the lavish catering Harry had ordered. The only exception was Percy, who was in

attendance with his new boss, Barty Crouch, the Director of International Magical Cooperation.

As for Jim himself, he spend most of the day sitting at a table next to a stack of books: *Jim Potter and the Mystery of the Aztec Warrior*, the latest entry in the Boy-Who-Lived series. Apparently, as part of this year's celebration, Jim would spend several hours today personally autographing copies for anyone willing to donate 20 galleons to the cause.

"I feel like Gilderoy Bloody Lockhart," he thought angrily.

Then, to the boy's shock (and barely restrained outrage), the next person in line was *Lucius Malfoy*, who casually dropped 100 galleons in exchange for five books.

"Early Christmas presents for dear friends, " the former Death Eater said with a smirk.

Jim fought down the urge to respond in a way that might cause a scene, but as he dutifully autographed the books, he could barely keep his hands from shaking in anger. And then, to add to the boy's amazement, after Malfoy banished his books back to Malfoy Manor with a wave of his wand, he moved off to meet with *Arthur Weasley* and chatted amiably with his former mortal enemy (and James's boss!) for several minutes as if they were old friends.

Not for the first time in recent months, Jim wondered when the whole world had gone mad.

Earlier that morning, the boy had participated in his usual birthday press conference. Most of the questions had been fielded by Lady Augusta Longbottom, the Chair of the charity's Board of Directors, and she'd handled the press conference quite ably. Jim only had to answer a few questions, mainly because Augusta had laid out strict

ground rules that forbade any inquiries about Peter Pettigrew.

That said, Jim had been surprised when Rita Skeeter had asked some pointed questions about his current living arrangements as he and his family clearly no longer resided at the manor house. Caught off guard, he stammered out a brief statement that due to "security concerns," he was now living in a Muggle neighborhood in the home that formerly housed the family of his aunt, Petunia Dursley, before Augusta quickly interrupted to change the subject.

Rita then asked where Jim's brother, the new Lord Wilkes, was since he and Jim shared a birthday. Augusta answered that Harry Black was in France as his birthday coincided with his first dueling competition. She also reminded the press that Harry had won his divisional championship two nights before. He and his friends, which included Augusta's grandson, would celebrate Harry's 14th birthday privately while enjoying the sights of Paris.

She was somewhat evasive on what specific sights they would be enjoying.

The Birthday Gala ended an hour after sunset with the only part of the day that Jim found enjoyable. Apparently, at Harry's recommendation, the Board contracted with the Weasley Twins to provide a fireworks show. Of course, shooting small fireworks out of one's wand was child's play. Literally so, as most young wizards and witches generated pyrotechnics the very first time they picked up a wand. But the idea of a *Muggle-style* fireworks show complete with massive multicolored explosions that lit up the whole night sky was something new to the Purebloods in attendance, and they were awestruck by the specially enchanted fireworks that could manifest as flaming dragons, winged

stallions, and other magical flying beasts before one colossal explosion that spelled out the words "HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JIM POTTER!"

As the crowd registered its approval with thunderous applause, Molly Weasley leaned in close to her precocious twins.

"How much did the Board pay you to put on this show again?" she asked just loud enough for the two boys to hear over the spectacle.

"About 50 galleons," Fred answered.

"And how much did it *cost* you to produce all this?" she asked while crooking her eyebrow.

George grinned. "Just under 20," he answered cheekily.

Molly sighed contentedly and patted both twins on the shoulder. "Good boys," she said with a warm smile.

Later that night, Rita Skeeter penned several owl posts that she sealed into secure envelopes before sending them off into the night. The envelopes were addressed to a half-dozen different people, but the letters inside all conveyed the same message.

"Urgent! Get me any information you can on the status and location of a Muggle named Petunia Dursley. "

Meanwhile, in France...

The world class dueling championship finished up that same night, and Harry found the caliber of competition both

astonishing and daunting. For novice and open class duelists, there was a long list of permissible spells. For the world class competitors, there was instead a rather short list of spells that were *forbidden*. Harry recognized Fiendfyre and the three Unforgivables, but the other banned spells were too obscure for him to have even heard of.

In a change of format, the world class used Bulgarian rules instead of French rules. Among other differences, this meant that instead of a rectangular dueling platform, the duel would take place in a large circular zone that gave the competitors more freedom of movement, and dodging played a much bigger role in the duelists' tactics. The dueling area was also filled with stone columns to provide the duelists with material for Transfiguration attacks, and all the duelists made spectacular use of them.

None of the duels approached the ferocity or ingenuity shown by Voldemort in the memories that Alastor Moody had shown Harry the previous December, but some of them were definitely on par with Bellatrix Lestrange during her "Miss Demeanor" days. Within seconds of each match's commencement, the dueling area was quickly filled with wild animals of all kinds (some of which were made of fire!), flashing bolts of lightning, flying blades that pursued duelists who attempted to dodge, and even stranger attacks. And to make things even more interesting, Apparation was legal in world class duels, and many of the combatants spent their duels constantly Apparating around the arena to get the jump on their opponents. The eventual winner was the hometown favorite, an older French wizard named Julian Montmorancy whose victory marked his 17th international championship win.

Harry thought the name sounded vaguely familiar, and Blaise filled him in on the family's history. The House of

Montmorancy was an old French Pureblood house known for its affinity for the Dark Arts. Most notably, the infamous Gilles de Rais was a member of the family in the 15th century. Once a patron of Joan of Arc in his younger days, de Rais apparently went mad in his old age and was executed for dark magic and other unspecified crimes. Blaise was evasive, but the fact that Muggle historians considered him to be a prolific serial killer said enough. The scandal ruined the family's reputation, and all the remaining Montmorancys expatriated to Britain during the French Revolution.

During the Grindelwald Conflict, the remaining Montmorancy siblings, Alphonse and Vivienne, returned to France along with Alphonse's son Julian (then still a teenager but already gifted with a wand), where they played a vital role in organizing the French Magical underground. After the war, the family remained in France in hopes of restoring honor to the name Montmerancy. The international fame accorded to Julian after decades of success on the dueling court aided greatly them in that goal.

After the tournament, there was yet another reception, and in an ironic turn of affairs, now Harry was the starstruck fan seeking an autograph from a dueling champion. To Harry's surprise, Montmorancy recognized him at once due to the boy's own impressive victory two nights earlier. Harry and Julian talked about dueling strategy for several minutes before the older wizard was pulled away to talk to other fans but not before saying cryptically that he looked forward to talking to Harry again.

"And sooner than you might think!" he said with a wink.

The Next Morning...

Countess Zabini's group enjoyed an early breakfast delivered to the dining area of her suite before most of the group set out for Euro Disneyland. Of the young people, only Justin had visited the amusement park previously; not even Blaise had had the opportunity before now. The five teens would be escorted through the park with Archie Goodwin, Gunther Hagrid, and Bobby Lattimer as their chaperones, while the Countess, Sirius, and the Finch-Fletchleys spent a more leisurely morning on a nearby golf course. Sirius initially expressed some unhappiness at not spending Harry's birthday with his godson, but after a lurid description from Archie about what Muggle rollercoasters were like, he reluctantly agreed to let the kids have their fun (but only after a stern instruction to his "bodyguard" to keep a close eye on the boys). The Countess Zabini reassured Harry that she would look after the boy's godfather.

While the group made their last-minute preparations, Blaise pulled his mother aside.

"You're going to... *look after* Sirius Black, the second-richest wizard in Britain?" Blaise asked quietly but anxiously.

"He's my guest, Passerotto," the Countess said placidly. "And to be fair, he's also a very handsome man."

"*Mamma!* "

"Hush now," she interrupted firmly. "You know as well as I that... I am not afforded a choice in these matters."

Blaise grimaced. "I know... but I still don't have to like it."

At half-past nine, the five boys and their three chaperones exited Gunther's van at a special VIP entrance to the park. A *very* special entrance, one limited exclusively to magical guests. To Harry's chagrin, he and the others were required

to surrender their wands, which were sealed away in special lockers along with both Harry and Blaise's portkeys. In exchange, they were each given special Disney pendants to wear.

"Now, we 'ave had no problems with wizarding guests since zee park first opened two years ago," said the staff member (a French squib, apparently) who collected their magical property.

"But just in case, if anything out of zee ordinary 'appens and you feel unsafe, just grasp zat pendant firmly and say '*when you wish upon a star*.' That will immediately notify zee park's magical personnel, and zey will Apparate in at a nearby but discreet location to address whatever zee problem is. Needless to say, zee park is warded against Apparation and Portkeys for anyone who isn't given special clearance for it."

As Harry slipped the pendant around his neck and then under his shirt, the park official continued.

"In addition to letting you summon park personnel, zee pendant also functions as a low-level Notice-Me-Not Charm. As long as you are not actively drawing attention to yourself, it will obscure references to magic and other casual comments zat might show up in your conversations with one another. Nevertheless, we ask you to be mindful of zee Statute of Secrecy at all times."

The park official then asked each of the boys a list of questions, mainly how much schooling they had each had, both magical and Muggle; when the last time was that any of them had caused accidental magic; and did any of them have any allergies they were aware of towards Muggle food.

Then, the squib opened a door and allowed the group entrance into "the Happiest Place on Earth."

And the Happiest Place on Earth quickly lived up to its reputation. Justin had been here once before, of course, and both Blaise and Bobby were at least familiar with the concept of an amusement park. But Harry, Theo, and Neville had never experienced anything like it. Even Regulus got into the act by purchasing a "Goofy" hat for Sirius, much to Harry's amusement. Gunther did his best to maintain a stern expression, but the effect was rather ruined by his cargo shorts and his rather tight-fitting black Polo shirt that proclaimed his loyalty to the Juventus Football Club.

The day thus far had been thoroughly enjoyable, although Justin nearly exhausted himself explaining every single cultural reference that the wizard-raised boys found baffling.

"But *why* does Indiana Jones want to go into a Temple of *Peril* ?!" Neville had asked in bafflement. "It's perilous! It's right there in the name!"

Despite the Longbottom heir's concerns, he ended up enjoying the park's newest rollercoaster just as much as his friends. So much so that the group rode it a total of three times, despite Archie and Gunther's increasing nausea. It was not until the third ride, just after lunch, that ***IT*** happened.

For the third time, Harry's party made its way to the front of the *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Peril* ride, but this time, there was only room for six members of their group in the carts.

"You boys go on ahead," Archie said, with Gunther by his side. "We'll be right behind you. Stay with Bobby and listen to him until we join you."

After promising to do so, the five Fourth Years and their just-graduated chaperone boarded the carts. Then, as Harry was being locked into a seat next to Neville near the front of the ride, he felt a sudden twinge on the side of his forehead as if to warn of the onset of a sudden headache. And to his surprise, he also noticed the park employee who helped to lock him into his seat giving him a strange look. And a rather *angry* look as well.

Almost as angry as the look given by the man in the cart in front of Harry who glared at him furiously and then put his arm tightly around his daughter's shoulders as if suddenly afraid the boy meant to do her harm.

Before Harry could react to this, the ride commenced. But the young Slytherin decidedly did *not* enjoy this third trip through *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Peril*, as within seconds, he was nearly overcome with an agonizing headache. Neville looked over to him with some concern only to let out a sudden scream of his own as the track hit an inversion and the boys were suddenly upside down. But Harry could barely notice or even open his eyes due to the pain from his head.

"*No!*" Harry suddenly realized in shock. "*Not my head! It's coming from my scar!*"

Less than twenty seconds later, the cart was pulling into the ride's conclusion, and Neville turned back to his friend.

"Harry, what's wrong? Why were you-BLOODY HELL!"

Neville's frightened expletive punched through the haze of Harry's pain and he pulled his hand away to look at the other boy... only for his eyes to widen in shock when he realized his hand was *covered in blood!*

"Harry!" Neville exclaimed. "Your scar! It's *bleeding* !"

By that point, the ride attendant had made his way to Harry and Neville's cart to unlock it. "*Merde* !" the man said under his breath as he noticed Harry's bloody face. "What 'as... 'appened... to... you?"

The Muggle's voice trailed off only to be replaced with what Harry could only describe as an animalistic growl. He turned to look up at the park employee and gasped. The man's eyes had gone *completely red* ! Before Harry could move, the attendant suddenly grabbed him by the neck and began choking him. With a shocked cry, Neville rose and tried to shove the man away, but he only succeeded in causing him to pull back and drag Harry along even as he continued throttling the life out of the boy.

Neville and the other boys tried to follow and help their friend, but they were quickly batted aside by the man who'd been sitting in front of Harry and by a few other Muggles... all of whom immediately attacked Harry as well even as they screamed hysterically at him! And all of them were conspicuous by their glowing red eyes!

"Monstre! Tuez le vite! Tuez le Freak! "

Immediately, Theo and Neville jumped onto the backs of several Muggles who were kicking their friend in the ribs even as the first man was still trying to choke the life out of him.

Meanwhile, over by the cart, a panicked Blaise was fumbling with his Euro Disney pendant. "There's no place like home! There's no place like home!"

"Wrong children's film, mate!" Justin shouted as he pulled out his own pendant and muttered "*when you wish upon a*

star."

Meanwhile, Bobby, in a surprisingly Gryffindorish move, jumped over the cart and hurled himself into the fray to body slam himself against the Muggle attacking Harry. While rugby had never been the Muggleborn's favorite sport, that didn't mean he was bad at it, and the Hufflepuff successfully knocked the man away from a gasping Harry Black.

Undeterred, another of the gang of crimson-eyed Muggles struck Bobby from behind and knocked him to the ground. Then, they shoved the other children to one side so that they could grab Harry together and lift him as one up over their heads.

"Le tunnel! Les montagnes russes! Tuez-le Freak! Tuez-le Freak!"

The Muggles carried the struggling and screaming boy towards the entryway through which the returning carts emerged. Over the cries of the Muggles, which had now become a chant- *"Tuez le Freak! Tuez le Freak!"* -Harry could hear the roar of the approaching coaster that carried Regulus and Gunther as it drew nearer. Finally, with a triumphant roar, the Muggles bodily hurled Harry down the tunnel directly into the path of the oncoming roller coaster. And while it was already slowing down as it approached the end of its journey, the cart was still moving fast enough to kill someone lying prone on the tracks ahead.

Gunther cursed loudly and then gripped the bar that locked him and Archie inside the cart. With a groan of twisted metal, the bar ripped free from the cart and was sent crashing off to the side.

"Go Goodwin!" Gunther yelled even as he practically hurled the wizard over the top of the cart and in Harry's general

direction. Then, the half-troll twisted around, braced himself as best he could, and slammed his left foot into the tracks to one side of the ride. There was the sudden sound of wood splintering and metal clanging, followed by a chorus of screams from the people sitting behind Gunther as the whole cart assembly began to shake violently and threatened to derail.

"*So much for the Statute of Bloody Secrecy*," the half-troll muttered even as he grimaced under the pain of shattering railroad ties with his feet.

Meanwhile, Regulus landed in a crouch but immediately broke into a run (narrowly staying ahead of the rollercoaster that Gunther was struggling to slow down). He darted forward, scooped up Harry in his arms, and raced down the track towards safety. Behind him, there was a loud groan of metal bending followed by sparks (and even louder screaming) as Gunther's cart jumped its tracks, bringing Harry and Friends' adventures with *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Peril* to a close for the day.

Up ahead, Reg heard the cracks of Apparation as the park's magical employees arrived to clean up the scene, repair the damage to the ride, and Oblivate the Muggles (including the Muggles who had just tried to kill Harry but had no idea why). But Reg's only concern was for his god-nephew who was now unconscious... and whose face was covered not just in blood, but also in a thick black ichor that dripped from the boy's scar.

Le Bureau des Affaires Sans-Magie

Two hours later

As Gaudrelle and Pitray reviewed their notes of the "incident" that happened at Euro Disney earlier that afternoon, the two investigators were startled when Leflaive, the third wizard on their squad, stormed into the room bearing a furious expression.

"Well, I suppose that was the shortest investigation in the history of the French Ministry!" he growled.

"We're off the case?" young Gaudrelle asked in surprise.

"There *is* no case!" Leflaive spat. "The whole thing is being written off as an accident. Apparently, the rollercoaster just spontaneously jumped its tracks, which panicked some of the Sans-Magie, and in the confusion, a child visiting the park-who just *happened* to be not just a British wizard but somehow a member of *their landed aristocracy* -was hurt. And let nothing more be said about it! Pfft! Damned *aristos* !"

"Honestly, Leflaive," said the longsuffering Pitray, the eldest and most cynical of the three, "I told you something like this would probably happen. In addition to the mysterious Lord Wilkes, two of the boy's associates are also Heirs to families that sit on the British Wizen... thingamabob. And a third is the son of the Countess Zabini."

Leflaive snorted contemptuously. "As if I need a reminder that the Black Widow has her fingers on this somehow. I'm surprised none of those who were hurt had recently married the bitch."

The investigator's rant was suddenly interrupted by a delicate cough from nearby. All three men turned and were surprised that a fourth man had entered the office so quietly that none of them had noticed. He was a middle-aged wizard with slick black hair, and he wore a dapper gray suit that

would have looked absolutely impeccable to a Muggle from 1956.

"I do apologize for interrupting," the man said mildly. "But I couldn't help but overhear your distress as a consequence of you bellowing about it at the top of your lungs. Can I assume, Inspecteur Leflaive, that you are upset about your superiors' decisions regarding the unpleasantness today at that amusement park?"

He chuckled amiably while glancing around at the other agents. "Pfft. As if *Disneyland* could ever be more unpleasant to a true Frenchman, *n'est-ce pas*?"

Leflaive ignored the man's cultural criticism. "You can assume whatever you like! It's no concern of yours!"

"Actually, *mon ami*, I think you'll find that I've taken a great interest in these affairs."

"Oh?" said Gaudrelle as he rose from his chair. "And who are you exactly?"

"But of course, gentlemen," the man said while reaching into his jacket pocket. "My credentials."

Gaudrell glanced at the identity card that the man handed over and immediately paled. He handed it over to Leflaive, whose earlier anger quickly melted away to be replaced by a sudden nervousness. The surprisingly plain card identified the man as Gabriel Delacour of *Le Bureau de L'Inconnu*.

Magical France's answer to the Department of Mysteries.

Leflaive coughed and adjusted his collar.

"Chevalier Delacour, please forgive my outburst. I certainly meant no disrespect..."

"Non, non, speak no more about it, Inspecteur Leflaive!" the Unspeakable said with an easy grin. "I understand what it's like to suffer political interference in the course of one's work. I certainly would never hold against you your frustrations of being denied the chance to do your jobs as you see fit. But there are... unusual circumstances at play in this instance. As I'm sure my presence here and now obviously indicates."

Pitray rose and nodded his head respectfully at the man who he now knew to be incredibly influential and powerful... and dangerous. "Naturally, Chevalier, we are more than eager to assist L'Inconnu in whatever capacity you require."

He looked around the room. "Aren't we, boys?" he added firmly. Both Leflaive and Gaudrelle immediately stammered their agreement.

"I am delighted to hear you say so!" Delacour exclaimed jovially. "Happily though, there are only a few quick matters to attend to, and then, I can let you fine officers return to your normal duties."

Instantly, Delacour's wand seemed to appear from nowhere, and with a single swish, every scrap of paper in the office that pertained to the Euro Disney investigation flew into the Unspeakable's offhand and then immediately *burst into flames*. Almost instantly, nothing was left but ash.

"Excellent," the man said. "Now only one thing remains. I'm sure I don't need to explain what's going to happen next, do I, *mes amis*?"

The three investigators looked at one another helplessly.

"No, Chevalier," said Leflaive dejectedly.

"Good. Explanations bore me. **OBLIViate.** "

Thirty seconds later, Gabriel Delacour, Chevalier de l'Inconnu, was gone, and none of the three men he'd left behind had any recollection of his existence, let alone their conversation. Likewise, none of the three had any recollection of their brief investigation into the Euro Disney incident nor even that any such incident had occurred. And on a semi-related note, Agent Leflaive now had a strong aversion to using the word '*bitch*' to refer to foreign dignitaries or indeed in any context whatsoever. Such boorishness was inappropriate for a member of the French Ministry of Magic.

And besides, one never knows when a relative of the bitch in question might be around to hear.

Meanwhile, back at the Hotel St. Germain

In the immediate aftermath of *the incident*, the Disney wizards healed Harry of his minor injuries and cleaned the blood from his face. Then, he and his party were quickly ushered out of the park and returned to their hotel rooms with instructions to remain there until investigators from the French Ministry came by to interview them all.

"I need to contact Sirius," said Archie Goodwin. Harry looked at his "*god-uncle* " sharply.

"He needs to know what happened," the Metamorphmagus added firmly. "He *is* your godfather."

"Which would mean more if I weren't already emancipated," Harry snapped. "You know what his health is like. If he finds

out someone tried to kill me with a group of possessed Muggles while he was out *golfing*, who knows what it will do to him."

At that, a still-shaken Blaise Zabini looked away as Harry continued.

"I don't want to tell him anything more than we have to until we get back to London. If nothing else, let's wait until after these... *investigators* arrive."

"The investigators won't be an issue," said Blaise quietly. "I, uh, made a call."

"What sort of call?" young Lattimer asked suspiciously.

"Let it go, Bobby," said Justin drily. "He's a Zabini. He *knows* people."

"Whatever," Harry muttered. "I'm tired. I'm gonna lay down for a while. If investigators show up, somebody wake me. If you hear for sure that Blaise's '*people*' have already made this go away... well, you can wake me up for that as well."

The boy exited the main room while Archie stared after him, his expression dark.

Once in his bedroom, Harry paused in front of the mirror hanging over the dresser. He leaned forward and examined his reflection. Despite the healing magic used on him earlier, Harry could see a faint redness in the rough outline of human hands, the marks of the park employee who'd gone mad first and tried to strangle him to death. The man with the red eyes.

The Slytherin reached up and gently rubbed his scar. Harry had no memories of it ever hurting very much at all, let

alone in the agonizing way it had earlier.

"Well," he thought. "I used to get migraines when I was in First Year DADA with Quirrell... and Voldemort. But even that didn't hurt as much as whatever hit me today. "

He wondered for a moment if there might be a connection, though. He'd gotten the scar as a footnote to Voldemort's failed attack on his family in 1981, a boring, jagged, and meaningless scar inflicted by falling debris to parody his more famous brother's more famous scar. Still, he *had* gotten it that same night. And then, he remembered *the eyes* of those Muggles who'd tried to kill him!

"They looked just like the red eyes Voldemort had in all those memories Moody let me watch! And the red eyes that Ron Weasley had while Riddle's diary-horcrux was possessing him!"

Harry looked again at the scar on his reflection's face. He rarely thought about it, or at least tried not to. Suddenly, the boy wondered if that had been a mistake on his part. He leaned in to *truly* study his scar for the first time since he'd begun working to master his natural Legilimency. His eyes narrowed in concentration.

"There is something about it! Or about the shape of it at least. It's not as... jagged as I'd always thought. And it's familiar too. Something I've seen a lot recently. Something I should know. But what? It's... it's right there! On the tip of my... !"

KNOCK-KNOCK. "Harry, it's Archie. Can I come in? I have some news."

Distracted by the knock, Harry moved over to the door, all thoughts of his scar forgotten for now. He opened the door to

let Archie in, but once inside, the Metamorphagus shook his head to transition back to the face of Regulus Black.

"Well?" Harry asked tiredly.

"Mr. Zabini reports that there will be no investigation. Apparently, his '*people*' have persuaded the Ministry to adopt the cover-story that everything that happened was the result of a malfunction in the rollercoaster itself. The physical assault that took place against you... *never happened.*"

Reg grimaced in annoyance. "Also, Mr. Zabini *still* refuses to provide any information about who his mysterious '*people*' are and how much they know about us."

He shook his head and then tilted it to study Harry's demeanor.

"Harry, what really happened back at the park?"

The boy shrugged vacantly and then turned away.

"Come on, Harry! I was close enough to see... those Muggles had unnaturally red eyes. They were clearly possessed and magically compelled to attack you. And I think you have some idea of by whom or by what. Now work with me here. If nothing else, I need to know so that I can tell Sirius."

"Tell him nothing beyond the story the French Ministry's released. There was a minor accident on a rollercoaster. I suffered some very minor injuries that were healed within minutes, but we had to cut the day short."

"Uh-huh. So we should say nothing about you being physically assaulted and nearly killed by *possessed Muggles with glowing red eyes* ?!"

Harry winced. He'd forgotten until just now that Regulus had been a Death Eater trainee before he defected and fled the country before he could be marked. Still, Regulus had met the Dark Lord. He'd obviously noticed that the possessed Muggles had glowing red eyes. But would he make the connection?

"I'll tell both you and him everything I know when we're back home, Reg. I want Professor Snape and Healer Tonks there to answer any questions. They've both been studying this for a while."

"This... *what*, Harry? This has happened before?"

The boy shook his head. "Never like this. There is something about me... about my scar specifically, I think... that causes Muggles to dislike me. Or it did, anyway. But in the past, it was never this... obvious."

"Yes," Reg said archly. "I would hardly call that fiasco *subtle* . So Snape and Tonks already know. Anyone else?"

"Artemus Podmore and Hestia Jones. Also, Theo, Neville, and Hermione Granger." Harry grimaced suddenly. "And maybe Blaise and his mother. They both seem excessively interested in me, so it's possible they know about my... condition."

Regulus looked at the boy sadly. He'd viewed himself as Harry's mentor from his time as Gilderoy Lockhart. But Harry was truly a Black now in every way that mattered under both Magic and the law. He wasn't just Sirius's godson. He was *family* .

"I'll hold off on telling Sirius so long as you promise that you *will* tell him soon. If nothing else, this should give him the impetus to take his Oath to the Wizengamot as soon as

possible so that we can finally access Chevenoir and Grandfather's library. If this is a curse of any kind, I'm sure we can find an answer there."

"Thank you," Harry said simply.

Reg studied the boy for a moment. "Come here. I want to show you something. A little trick that might be helpful."

He maneuvered Harry to face the mirror again. Then, he patiently talked the boy through the process of making the bruises around his throat slowly disappear through Metamorphmagery.

"You can heal injuries this way?" the boy asked in surprise.

"It works best on minor cosmetic injuries. You're better off using a healing spell or a potion for nearly anything else. But I only know field-medical level healing Charms, and we don't have any Bruise Removal Paste. And as a Metamorphmagus, you should be able to heal bruises like this one just by thinking about it."

Harry nodded but said nothing as he remembered grimly all those minor cuts and bruises from his time at 4 Privet Drive that always seemed to heal so fast. A sign of his "freakishness" according to the Dursleys. When he'd been little, he'd wondered once if they might be nicer to him if he could just suffer in pain long enough.

A few hours later, Sirius, the Countess, and Justin's parents finally returned. True to his word, Regulus said nothing to Sirius about the incident, though from their reactions, Harry was sure that Blaise had told the Countess, and he suspected that Justin had said something of it to his father. For their part, both the Muggles seemed as friendly towards Harry as before the trip to Euro Disney, but Sir Malcolm

subtly changed the topic when Sirius's barrage of questions about what the park was like made all the boys visibly uncomfortable.

Later still, when the group was headed out for Harry's celebratory birthday dinner, Sir Malcolm pulled Harry off to one side. The boy tensed reflexively at the thought of being alone with a Muggle, with *any* Muggle. But Sir Malcolm showed no signs of any hostility. If anything, he was sad and contrite.

"Harry," he said apologetically. "Justin told me the basics of what happened. I just wanted to say how sorry I am. I would never have sent you off to someplace so packed with Muggles if I'd known anything like *that* could happen!"

"It's alright, Sir Malcolm," Harry replied after glancing around to see if anyone was near. "Neither of us could have expected it. And most of the day was great! I'm really grateful for the chance to go. Just, you know, except for that bit at the end."

He laughed bitterly. "Our first two trips through the *Temple of Peril* were brilliant. Maybe that's what I get for trying to face the peril a third time."

Malcolm didn't laugh. Instead, he eyed the boy speculatively. "The third time. Tell me, Harry. Can you think of anything different about that third ride compared to the first two?"

Harry shook his head slowly, but then, an idea struck him. His eyes widened, and he swallowed.

"On the last ride, the one where everything went wrong, all us kids were in one cart along with Bobby Lattimer, who's just out of school himself. The two adults were behind us in a

separate car. We didn't have our wands. And the first person to attack me did so by trying to choke me, which also prevented me from using the pendant they gave us to call for wizarding aid."

Malcolm went pale as the implications struck him as well.

"In the future, Lord Wilkes," he said gravely. "I think it would be best if you did not meet with Barbara or myself-or indeed, *any* Muggles-without an adult wizard you trust on hand as well."

Harry nodded slowly as the truth became clear. Whatever lay hidden in his scar ("*Bob*," he'd taken to calling it during one of his rare frivolous phases), it had not been dormant all these months.

It had simply learned to wait for a good time to strike.

Meanwhile, back at 4 Privet Drive...

In retrospect, Jim concluded that it had been a good thing the Official Jim Potter Birthday Gala™ had been scheduled for Saturday. For the first time in years, Jim's actual birthday was a private celebration for just family. Molly Weasley had sent a massive birthday cake with fourteen candles to 4 Privet Drive, along with a hand-knitted jumper with a "JP" monogram. Both were delivered by Ron who spent a few hours at Privet Drive visiting his friend before heading home.

But the best present was the last thing Ron had to deliver, which he did with all due ceremony and pomp: an invitation for Jim to sit with the Weasleys at the final match of the Quidditch World Cup. Apparently, Arthur had done some favor for Ludo Bagman, and in recompense, the head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports had provided

finals tickets for the whole family. But as it turned out, Percy would be attending the games anyway in his capacity as Barty Crouch's new personal assistant, and Molly had unexpectedly gotten a contract to cater Lucius Malfoy's tent, so they ended up with extra tickets.

Other personal birthday gifts (as opposed to the formal gifts he'd been given the day before that ultimately went to charity) had been coming in all week via owl. While 4 Privet Drive was heavily warded to conceal the Potter family's presence from the larger magical community, those wards allowed the passage of some owl posts provided certain conditions were met. Most importantly, the sender had to be someone on a first-name basis with James, Lily, or Jim, and the package itself could not contain any dark or harmful magic. In fact, one of the wards (an obscure and highly intuitive one that Lily discovered and applied) actually blocked owl posts that were sent with any harmful intent whatsoever, even of a nonmagical nature. The only gifts that came to the house by owls were from trusted friends.

The whole Quidditch team pitched in for new gear for their Seeker, since his family's diminished circumstances meant he wouldn't be able to buy new gear himself. Hermione, naturally, had sent a book, one which appeared to be about some obscure magical creature Jim had never heard of.

"Mum? What's a hobbit?" he asked.

Lily explained that *The Hobbit* was a work of Muggle fiction but one she felt sure her son would enjoy despite its wildly inaccurate depictions of goblins, dwarves, and trolls.

Padma Patil sent a moving picture depicting a panoramic view of Shamballa, along with a letter expressing her regret that Jim couldn't return for a second year. She mentioned in

passing how much she'd enjoyed their Wu Xi Do sparring sessions and that she hoped to continue them when they returned to Hogwarts, a sentiment that made his stomach flutter for some reason. He was distracted from examining that odd feeling by the postscript to Padma's letter:

"By the way, do you know what happened to Brother Chandra? Or Mr. Lupin, I suppose? I thought he was coming back here for the summer, but no one's seen him. "

Jim frowned at that. He'd not heard from Remus Lupin since leaving Hogwarts weeks earlier. And Godric, the owl he'd sent to Shamballa with a letter for the man, wouldn't have even reached the magical city by now, much less returned with any reply. Jim figured it would be a very angry owl that would come back in another week or so if Remus wasn't even in Shamballa to receive his letter.

Jim was even more confused when an unfamiliar owl arrived later that afternoon bearing a package with the initials RJL scrawled across the front. Quickly, Jim tore open the package to reveal yet another book, this one with a blank cover. There was a note inside:

Happy Birthday, Jim!

I thought you might find this interesting reading. I'd recommend against letting anyone know you have it, however. Please don't owl me with any questions, as they probably wouldn't be the sort of questions you would want to be seen asking. I'll be in touch soon.

Remus

"What's that?" asked James.

Jim turned to the first page and his eyes widened at the title. He cleared his throat.

"It's from Remus. It's about... the history of Shamballa."

"Hmm. Sounds interesting," James replied in a tone that indicated he would probably not be asking to borrow the book for his own entertainment.

Soon after, Jim left for his own bedroom where he sat down at his desk to open the book again. The title was, in fact, *Animagery: The Deeper Mysteries*, and it appeared to be someone's bound notes on the topic of becoming an Animagus. Jim smiled, relieved to know that, wherever Remus was, he was obviously safe and had the freedom to write and send packages, even if Jim was not to reply. Whatever Remus was up to, Jim was sure he'd hear all about it when school started back up. And with a little luck, Jim would even be able to show him a completed and controlled transformation by then.

As Jim opened the Animagery book and began to read, it didn't occur to him that he'd never really had a chance to see Remus's handwriting and so would not have been able to recognize a forgery.

Nor did he consider that there might be someone else who had once been on a first-name basis with his family, who had no personal desire to harm Jim, who was an Animagus himself, and who had a strong interest in seeing Jim Potter follow in his footsteps.

That night, back in Paris...

After dinner, Harry's group returned to the St. Germain for one last night. Sir Malcolm had arranged for his private jet to

fly from Marseilles to Paris, and he and his party were scheduled to leave out of De Gaulle Airport the next morning. Meanwhile, the Countess, Blaise, and Gunther would return to Marseilles by Portkey later in the day, while Bobby Lattimer would drive Sirius back to London by car.

Just before 10:00, Harry retired to his room but was surprised to find a note on his pillow:

Harry,

Meet me on the balcony at midnight. It's time.

Serena Zabini

At the appointed hour, Harry silently left his room and made his way to the balcony that overlooked the Parisian skyline. The Eiffel Tower stood illuminated in the distance. The Countess Zabini was waiting for him, wearing evening casual clothes with a bag hanging from her shoulder. Harry was glad he hadn't changed into pajamas yet.

"*Buona sera*, Lord Wilkes," she said.

"And to you, Countess."

"Please, call me Serena. We are now social peers, after all."

"... Harry, then. You wished to meet with me now?"

"I did. There is much we must discuss, Harry. But not here. Tell me, have you ever Side-Apparated before?"

"I have. Though I am... reluctant to let anyone just spirit me away in the middle of the night without telling anyone after the day I've already had. Where is it you wish to take me?"

"To perhaps the one place in all the world where we can *truly* talk without fear of being overheard. I do not blame you for your caution, Harry. You've indeed had a trying day. And, well, I *am* a Zabini and am fully aware of my own reputation. We sometimes cannot help but engender distrust in others. It is the price we pay for our secrets, the most important of which I am now willing to share with you. Will you trust me now, long enough for me to tell you things that you *need* to know?"

Harry studied the witch for a long time. While his Legilimency gave him no reason to fear the Countess, he was certain that she was a skilled Occlumens, and he had learned from both Snape and Scrimgeour that his deductive genius could be fooled with sufficient skill or training. But in the end, it didn't matter. He'd come this far, and he was certain the woman did have answers for him. Probably not answers he would want to hear, and likely answers to questions he'd not even known to ask, but there would still be answers.

He reached out and took Serena Zabini's arm.

One nauseatingly unpleasant Apparation later, Harry was surprised to find himself in a graveyard.

"Where are we?" he asked guardedly, his wand already out.

"*Cimetière du Père-Lachaise*," Serena answered. "Near the old Lestrange Mausoleum."

"Ooookay," Harry said. "I suppose that answer will make more sense when you tell me *why* we are here."

"We are here, Harry Black, because in 1927, Gellert Grindelwald did something extraordinary here. Extraordinarily *evil*, but also extraordinary from a magical

perspective. And in response, Nicolas Flamel did something equally extraordinary, again magically speaking. The aftereffects of that night affected this area and especially the Mausoleum in ways that make it beneficial for our use tonight."

As the older witch spoke, she led Harry through the graveyard and into the Lestrangle Mausoleum itself. Almost immediately, Harry felt uncomfortable as he advanced. He also noticed that his scar itched slightly but showed no signs of its former rampage. Once inside, Serena produced a small electric torch from her bag and turned it on to light the way. Harry's eyes narrowed, and he pulled out his own wand.

"*LUMOS.*"

There was no effect. Serena glanced his way.

"As a result of the powerful and unnatural magics unleashed that night in 1927, this area is, for lack of a better word, magic-proof. No wand-based magic is possible in this place."

Harry crooked an eyebrow. "What about potions?"

She paused in surprise. "An interesting question. Do you know, I honestly don't think anyone has ever attempted to bring a cauldron here to test it."

The two continued on until at last they entered a large chamber. It was circular, with a domed ceiling and many rows of stone benches facing down onto a round open area. The first thing Harry noticed was that every bit of stone in here had been bleached to a pale bluish white that gave off an eerie luminescent glow. Harry's discomfort deepened, and his hand clenched tighter on his wand even though in this place it felt like a dead stick in his hand.

The second thing Harry noticed was that in the center of the circular stage stood a large box, roughly 10x10 meters, that seemed to be coated in pure gold. There was a single door on one side that resembled a bank vault door.

"What is *that* supposed to be?" the Slytherin asked.

"We call it *the Vault*," she replied. "It really needs no other name."

Without another word, Serena strode up to the Vault's door before reaching into her purse to produce a small knife. Harry took a step back instinctively, but Serena ignored him. Instead, she used the knife to cut her own hand before smearing the blood over the door. After a second, the bloodstain glowed a bright red before fading away. Then, the wheel on the door spun itself, and the door slowly opened.

"So what are you hiding in there?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"A table and two chairs," Serena replied. "Shall we enter?"

The witch led the way, with Harry following closely behind. To his surprise, the interior was much bigger than the outside, at least thirty feet across. In the center, there was indeed a circular table with a high-back chair on either side and a chandelier hanging above. Once Harry was inside, Serena reached behind him to pull the Vault's door shut.

"**LUMOS**," intoned the Countess as she flicked her wand, and the chandelier lit itself.

For his part, Harry suddenly felt his connection with his wand once more as soon as the door closed. He confirmed this by successfully casting a Lumos of his own.

"So," he said. "We're in a room where magic works that's in the middle of a building where magic doesn't work. This seems... overcomplicated as far as security measures go."

"That would depend upon who or what you want to stop from eavesdropping, Harry. The Vault's exterior is coated with a thin layer of orichalcum that is 65% pure. It cost multiple fortunes and has been used by my family and our associates for decades for our most important divinations and our most sensitive discussions. It is a room that no magic known to us can penetrate, standing in the middle of a dead zone where no magic can function. If there is anything further that can be done to shield our discussions from the Enemy, we do not know what it is."

Harry blinked. "And who is this Enemy?"

"Someone who is always watching, always listening, and always waiting for a chance to act. But first things first. My Blaise says you have become proficient at maintaining multiple mind-streams, yes?"

"I am... proficient," said Harry who assumed that opening seven independent minds if only for a few seconds met that standard.

"Have you begun a study of '*the Hidden Mind*' technique?"

The boy frowned. He had dabbled with that technique but not to a large degree. The Hidden Mind referred to the practice of locking away important information in a secondary persona that would lie dormant until activated. He'd made use of it the previous January to meet with the Headmaster while wearing a personality designed to be ignorant of Sirius Black's innocence and his rescue from Azkaban.

"I am familiar with the technique," he replied.

"Good," Serena said as she took a seat at the table and pulled a deck of Tarot cards from her handbag. "I recommend you open a secondary mind right now to retain all memories of our discussions. Do not allow your primary mind to recall our discussions when you leave this place. When we're done here, I will provide a recommended list of triggers for remembering when the time is right."

Harry crooked an eyebrow. "Is all this really necessary? Who are you so afraid of?"

"Not who, but what, Harry. The enemy is Fate, and Fate is already interested enough in you. So we will speak plainly here and then hide our discussions away in the deeper recesses of our minds. So long as we display no conscious memories on the outside, Fate will not take steps to take those memories from us. Or perhaps do worse to us."

The boy looked around while taking his own seat. "But we're safe in here? From... Fate?!"

"We are in a room that no magic can penetrate, hidden in the center of an area in which no magic can function. If more than this is required to hide us from Fate's attention, then doing so is impossible, and we would be better off in accepting our doom. I decline to do so. The motto of House Zabini is "*Finche respiriamo, speriamo.*" Or "*While we breathe, we hope.*"

She passed the cards over to Harry.

"Now, we shall dispense with tea leaves this time and stick to more reliable techniques. Shuffle the cards until you feel comfortable and pass them back to me."

After a moment's hesitation, Harry did as the witch asked. When he returned the deck, she cut the cards and then began laying out a spread on the table. The spread design was more complicated than the simple 3x3 spread that the Countess had used two years earlier to read Harry's fortune on his 12th birthday, but he knew enough to notice the oddity of the cards themselves. Even though he'd shuffled the cards thoroughly, *all sixteen* of the cards came up as Major Arcana, which might have been a neat card trick or possibly just a harbinger of doom.

Serena studied the spread carefully before giving Harry a piercing gaze. "You are now the Prince of Slytherin, I take it?"

Harry stiffened in his chair. "Before I say anything else, tell me what you know about that."

"I know everything and nothing, I'm afraid."

Quickly, she recited the Potter Prophecy in its entirety before revealing to Harry how she knew it. What no Potter had ever had even suspected until now was that an ancestor of hers named Armand Zabini had overheard the Prophecy in its entirety and revealed it to the elders of his family. And they, in turn, undertook the mission of guarding the Prophecy and averting the apocalypse it foretold as a sacred family trust.

Harry snorted. "The Potters tried to do the same thing. It didn't work out too well for them."

Serena shook her head. "The Potters did all that they were capable of doing. But their approach was too direct. They focused entirely on preventing the heralding lines from coming to pass, and that was always a futile effort. No matter what the Potter family has done over the last two centuries to prevent it, when the Time of the Dark God was

at hand, the Two who should be as One *would* be set against each other in hatred, and the Last Potter *would* rise as the Prince of Slytherin. I do not know precisely what "*the Prince of Slytherin* " means beyond, obviously, a position of power within Slytherin House. I know that Blaise knows but is bound from revealing the secret to me."

She gestured towards the cards.

"I also know that you are the first Potter to be sorted into Slytherin since the Prophecy's utterance. You are the first Potter in all that time to have even one sibling let alone be born as a pair of twins who have a famously antagonistic relationship. And the cards I have just drawn to represent your recent past-the Magician, the Emperor, the Sun, the World, and the Fool-tell me that you have indeed come into your power and achieved the goals you had set for yourself when last I read your cards. *Except* that the Fool also tells me that you realized too late that achieving those goals might have been a terrible mistake. I suspect the fulfillment of an apocalyptic prophecy would fit that description."

Harry glared at the woman in consternation. "You know, if you really wanted to avert this prophecy, perhaps a good first step might have been *telling* me about it before it was too late."

Serena shook her head. "One cannot simply *avert* a True Prophecy by direct action. Your father's efforts to do so almost certainly led directly to its fulfillment, and I suspect your own efforts to avert the Prophecy once you learned of it were similarly unsuccessful. After all, from what Blaise told me, you only revealed your sudden knowledge of the Prophecy to him on the morning of March 26, but by the evening of March 28, that part of the Prophecy was fulfilled, presumably by your ascension. Blaise, of course, had to

speaking carefully due to the potency of the secrecy spells that guard the identity of the Prince of Slytherin, but he was able to communicate that much to me. Am I right in guessing you thought you'd found a way to avert the Prophecy which only accelerated it instead?"

The boy glared bitterly at her. On one hand, he was still embarrassed that what he'd thought would be a decisive and irrevocable action to reject the Hydra Throne instead proved to the Hydra his worthiness to claim it. On the other hand, he was annoyed to realize the extent to which Blaise had been spying on him all this time, even to the point of revealing his status as Prince no matter how indirectly. Serena picked up on that part of his mood.

"For whatever it's worth, Harry, let me assure you of one thing. My son Blaise is *intensely* loyal to you. Like the rest of my extended family, he feels a duty to fight against the Prophecy, but unless he concludes that doing so threatens our family, he will follow you wherever your path leads."

"So why didn't he do anything to stop me from becoming Prince?"

"Because he would have failed and possibly died in the attempt. Remember what I told you before. *True Prophecies want to come true*. Once we suspected that you might be the one to trigger the Prophecy, I directed him to do *nothing* to interfere with you doing so, lest Fate notice *him*... and take action against him."

"*Destiny is paid for in blood*," Harry said softly, repeating the portentous words that Serena had said to him in the summer of 1992.

"Indeed. The final two lines of the Prophecy are what students of Divination refer to as heralding lines. Your

becoming the Prince of Slytherin heralded the commencement of the rest of the Prophecy *at its appointed time* . When the time was right, the Last Potter would become the Prince of Slytherin. And if that time is now, then anyone who tried to prevent you rising as Prince would suffer for it."

Harry started rubbing his temples. "So what's the point? Do you people *want* the Prophecy to come true?!"

"Whether we want such a thing is irrelevant. The Prophecy will come true. Our goal is to do whatever we can to ensure that the outcome is as favorable as possible."

"The only two outcomes I see are a choice between '*Oblivion and Damnation* .' Which is your preference?"

"Oblivion, of course."

Harry's eyes bulged at how casually the Countess expressed her preference for the ending of the world. For the first time since meeting the witch, the words "*death cult* " popped unbidden into his head.

"Would you care to expand on that?" he asked coolly.

"Gladly. But first, let us look back at the rest of your cards for context. Turning to the immediate future, we have the Wheel of Fortune inverted, Justice inverted, Strength, the Hanged Man, and the Lovers inverted. A dangerous conflict draws near, one you will be drawn into unfairly and against your will. And while you will succeed in the challenges you face, even those successes may redound to the benefit of your enemies."

She paused and glanced back at the cards. "Oh, and you will also experience complications of a romantic nature which

will threaten to distract you from more important concerns."

Harry sniffed. "That's never been an issue for me before."

"You've never been a 14-year-old multimillionaire celebrity before either," Serena replied with a smirk. "Frankly, if my Blaise were a girl, I'd have tried matchmaking by now."

But as she turned back to the cards, her expression grew more pensive.

"Looking farther ahead, we find the Devil, the Hierophant inverted, the Hermit inverted, and the Tower. A great evil rising against you, likely the same Dark Wizard who will one day become a Dark God. Perhaps Voldemort, perhaps someone else. You must be prepared for either possibility. You will experience both the loss of a powerful guardian figure and a time of forced seclusion spent cut off from your allies and forced to rely solely on yourself. And ultimately, a time of destruction and catastrophe."

Finally, she pointed to the last two cards. "All of which lead to the end of your journey: Death and Judgment."

"I'm still not seeing any positive outcomes," Harry said blandly.

"On the contrary," she answered. "I find these cards quite reassuring. You see, your journey does not *end* with Death. That is the penultimate card. After Death comes Judgment. Truthfully, if I *had* to choose between Oblivion and Damnation to the Dark God's Hell, I would choose the former because nothingness is preferable to eternal torment."

She tapped the Judgment card with a perfectly manicured finger. "*But* I believe that the presence of the Judgment card falling *after* the Death card implies a way through Oblivion

to whatever lies beyond it. That some of us will be judged worthy of some fate other than mere Oblivion. That there is something else waiting for us after the End of All Things."

"You *believe* ? So you don't have any proof of that?"

The witch smiled. "As I told you, my family's motto is '*While we breathe, we hope.*' And the last time we discussed matters of True Prophecy, I told you that such prophecies are expressions of something that Magic itself *wants to take place* . As you note, by the plain language of the Prophecy, our future is a choice between Oblivion and Damnation. But I do not believe that Magic desires our destruction but is simply *undecided* on how to go about it. The Prophecy must offer some possible means of salvation or else it was pointless for it to be made. There *must* be some way, some impossible needle that can yet be threaded, to allow at least some of us to survive. And given the language of the Prophecy, I do not believe we are meant to choose the Dark God as our path to that survival."

"So you're going with Death instead?"

She nodded. "Yes, Harry. Because of those two, Death is the only one who might fight *for us* ."

As Harry's eyes narrowed, he felt the familiar sensation of a kaleidoscope locking into place.

"You're talking about the Deathly Hallows. You believe the legend that whoever reunites them becomes Master of Death."

"Yes, for to *truly* master anything is to become one with that thing in every way that matters. Tell me, Harry. Do you know the Tale of the Three Brothers?"

"From Beedle the Bard? I've read it. Three brothers cross a river using magic. That apparently annoys Death so much that he gives them the Hallows, which promptly leads to the death of two of them."

Serena nodded. "And what about the Tale of the Three *Sisters*?"

Harry blinked. "Three... Sisters?"

"A legend from ancient China. When Death came in the form of the Yama King to claim the soul of Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor and China's first wizard-king, his three daughters met the death god first to offer him hospitality. They danced and sang for him and offered him rice wine and sticky buns laced with opium. Eventually, the Yama King fell asleep, and the three daughters stole his robe, his staff, and his ring, which they then presented to their father on his death bed. Huangdi used the talismans to restore himself to his former vitality and then to ascend to claim the Throne of Heaven as the August Personage of Jade."

"... Okay?"

"Or if you don't like that one, how about the tale of Hermes Trismegistos-Hermes "Thrice-Blessed"-who earned his place among the gods of Olympus by sneaking into Hades and stealing Death's robe, scepter, and crown. Or Loki, who stole Hela's cloak, mace, and jeweled amulet in order to blackmail her into restoring Balder to life. Or Ishtar, who became queen of the Annunaki after defeating the death goddess Erishkagel and stripping her of her dress, her scepter, and the jewel that rested on her forehead. Or any of a dozen other stories I could recite from around the world, most of which have been erased from Muggle literature and most wizarding literature by order of the ICW."

"Hold on!" Harry exclaimed. "Are *all* of those Deathly Hallows?"

The Countess shrugged. "The true nature of the Hallows remains a mystery. Perhaps the differing descriptions are due to the tales changing over time, or perhaps the Hallows themselves have the power to change their own nature. Certainly, they have some ability to hide themselves given their history. We suspect that the Potter Invisibility Cloak is actually Death's Cloak, handed down to the Potters centuries ago when the last daughter of House Peverell married into the Potter family. Her ancestor centuries removed was Ignotus Peverell, and he and his two siblings were reputed to be the Three Brothers by some theorists."

The Countess sniffed disdainfully. "Obviously James Potter has never considered that, or else he would not let his son carry it about to use for pranks just as his own father once gifted it to him for equally frivolous purposes. But the tales that still exist-often in books the ICW deems illegal to own-all have remarkable similarities. Three items. One a wooden stick or staff of some kind, one a stone of some sort usually set in jewelry, and one a flowing garment. All given by or taken from an avatar of Death. And all granting power over Death to whoever acquires all three."

"And why does the ICW censor this? Are they afraid of wizards going after the Hallows?"

"Yes. If there is any truth to the legend of the Hallows, the Confederation certainly would consider them too dangerous to roam free. And it doesn't help that a number of infamous dark wizards were known to quest for the Hallows, most recently Grindelwald who claimed to be Master of the Elder Wand."

"Was he?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Very possibly, though how Albus Dumbledore could have defeated him in one-on-one combat is a mystery if he truly held the Death Stick as his personal wand. To be honest, my greatest fear has always been that the ICW claimed the wand after his defeat and then either destroyed it or hid it away, in which case this entire line of inquiry has been a waste of my family's time for nearly 200 years."

Harry sat for a moment to think over what the Countess had told him so far.

"If you think Voldemort is the Dark God, I'm not the one who's supposed to defeat him. That's Jim Potter's job."

"Perhaps. That you have left the House of Potter might change things. It is possible that, having played your part by rising as Prince, you have completed your role in the Potter Prophecy. I suspect that there is another Prophecy that governs the relationship between Jim Potter and Voldemort, but I do not know its contents."

"Well I do," Harry thought. "But I'm not ready to share it even if I weren't under oaths."

"How do you explain me being the Last Potter?" he asked instead.

"That is a simple matter," Serena said while waving her hand distractedly. "My personal theory is that you and your brother were simply switched at birth."

"... What?!"

"From what I have learned, your parents were not expecting twins, and neither were the Healers at the time of your birth."

It would have been a simple mistake for the Mediwitch who took custody of you both immediately after you were born to mislabel you both, with the younger twin identified as the older one and vice versa."

Harry's eyes widened. The possibility that someone made a mistake and that he was never the Potter Heir at all had not occurred to him.

"Such a mistake would be typical of the subtle manipulations Fate can engineer in bringing about a True Prophecy," she continued. "Consider how James Potter has treated you for most of your life. Now imagine that you were identified as the younger son and thus without any of the protections guaranteed to an Heir. Potter could have expelled you from the family in infancy and certainly would have immediately after your Sorting."

Harry sat still for a long time as he absorbed Serena's theory. It sounded plausible, but for some reason, Harry didn't think it sounded *right*. He shook his head and moved on to another matter.

"Since we're sharing information, I suppose I should ask: Are you aware that Sybill Trelawney has recently made *another* Prophecy?"

This time, it was Serena's turn to display shock, and Harry recited to her the Prophecy that Hermione had related to him, the one that led him to his misfired attempt to disclaim the Prince of Slytherin role.

"Until at last, the Question is asked, and the Decision is made: Our story has been told before. But will it ever be told again?" the Countess said repeating the final lines slowly. *"Interessante ."*

"That's not the word I'd use, but okay," said Harry. "Now what does it mean?"

"Well," she said slowly, "if *my* theory is correct, then this Prophecy ties in with the first Potter Prophecy. The *Question* refers to the choice between Damnation and Oblivion, and the Decision refers to the fact that the Prince of Slytherin will make it."

And with that, she tapped the Judgment card again. Harry frowned.

"But the first Prophecy doesn't guarantee that Death will defeat the Dark God, only that theirs will be the last battle! Even assuming this refers to me, do you have any reason to think that I can win against a Dark God other than... *hope*? What powers does the Master of Death have anyway?"

"We... do not know," Serena said reluctantly. "And to be honest, even this latest Prophecy, even though it addresses the Prince of Slytherin, does not clearly state that the Prince will also be the Decider."

"So other than what you've read in my cards tonight, you don't really have any guarantees that it's my job to defeat the Dark God and usher you lot to some happy afterlife."

"Again, no. There are no guarantees with a True Prophecy. As you found out firsthand, they are invariably uttered at the right time and in front of the right people to trigger a response. No True Prophecy is ever made to someone who will simply shrug and forget about it. The most recent Prophecy was passed to you, and you immediately reacted in a way that caused the *first* Potter Prophecy to come to pass. I do not know that you will be the one to master Death. But you are high on my family's list of potential candidates."

"Uh-huh," Harry said. "And just how many people are on your list of potentials?"

Serena looked suddenly bashful. "Seventeen at the moment."

"... *Seventeen* ?!" the boy exclaimed.

"Reuniting the Hallows is not the only way to figuratively become Death within the terms of the Potter Prophecy. It is, in my opinion, the most likely way of doing so, and your connection to the Potter Invisibility Cloak seems auspicious. But still, the Hallows are not the only way. Other members of my family pursue other leads."

"Uh-huh. And how many candidates for Dark God are on your list."

"Fifty-three," she replied, causing Harry to cough in surprise. "Though at the moment, the probability that the Dark God is either You-Know-Who or someone connected to him is so high that he dominates most of our attention."

He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face.

"So... what do I do with all this?" he finally asked.

"Do?" she responded in surprise. "Do... nothing. If it is your destiny to reunite the Hallows and become the Master of Death, then in time, the Hallows will come to you. In the meantime, you are still young. Study your lessons. Continue to hone your skills. Enjoy your time with friends and family. Restore the name of Wilkes to respectability. And, I suppose, do whatever it is that the Prince of Slytherin is supposed to be doing."

The boy gave a sour expression. "It is *really* not in my nature to sit back and wait for things to happen."

"Of course not," Serena said with a laugh. "Fate would never have selected you if it were!"

By 2:00 a.m., Harry was back in his room and finally in bed. He was not quite asleep yet but rather was in a light meditative state. He and the Countess had talked for another half hour before Harry locked away the most important secrets in a secondary mind with a half-dozen events that could cause his primary mind to remember everything. One of those events was entering a meditative state right on the verge of sleep which would allow him to psychically talk with himself. Apparently (according to the Countess, anyway), Fate took no notice of what forbidden thoughts occurred in dreams, and so long as Harry didn't wake up fully, he could enter a sleep-cycle just light enough to let him think about things without drawing "*unhealthy attention* ."

When he asked for an explanation of what that meant, the Countess would only say that one of her "associates" was forced to lock away important knowledge *about him* to avoid some type of supernatural attack she'd never experienced before but which she feared might have been fatal.

"What sort of knowledge about me?" Harry asked nervously.

"The fact that the scar on your head is in the form of a Sowilo rune and was almost certainly placed there deliberately, either by someone as part of a ritual or by *something* as a manifestation of your latent power and of Fate's interest in you."

After that, Harry suddenly lost interest in further discussion about his scar and obeyed Serena's recommendation that he lock that bit of knowledge as deeply as possible and share it with no one else. While he nominally trusted Serena Zabini, he was still too shaken by the afternoon's events to confront any more strangeness associated with his scar. Also, he still didn't know anything about the rest of her "associates" (who he still thought might better be termed "cultists"), but he wondered how many of them might assume the worst if they found out he had an evil scar in the shape of the Norse rune of power and that it was apparently trying to kill him.

Just before he finally fell asleep, Harry had one last thought that seemed barely relevant compared to the cosmic import of his meeting with the Countess, but still it stuck with him.

"I totally forgot to ask what Fleur Delacour's deal was !" he thought to himself in annoyance, "Dammit! She better not be my romantic complication! "

Next: There will be a brief hiatus as I will be spending November working on Strangers In Boston as my NaNoWriMo project. The next chapter is scheduled for December 15 when Harry's summer break continues, most likely with Harry and Sirius's Oaths of Unity and, at long last, a meeting with the late unlamented Erasmus Wilkes.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading):

The Boy Who Said No by ChoCedric, in which the Dursleys are a loving family to Harry, but Petunia still hates the wizarding world for taking away her sister and getting her killed, with the end result that Harry rejects his Hogwarts letter. It goes over about as well as you'd expect.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: Anne-athema Codexm Banshee, BlueWater5, Bob, Dr. Nemo, dragonsandotters, heyob, Indigo, kean, Keral, Krisni, LFGB, Norégveldi, PrettyPinkCupcake, Pyunik, Rubric of Ahriman, Sakkiko, and TNT. Thanks, guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 15,595. Followers: 16,303. Favorites: 14, 487. Communities: 230. Discord followers: Over 3821! Go Team POS!

AN5: The French equivalent to the Unspeakables is called Le Bureau de L'Inconnu or the Bureau of the Unknown. It's an in-joke to The Inconnu, one of the secret conspiracies in Vampire: The Masquerade (where the name probably doesn't make much grammatical sense either). The Bureau's members are informally referred to as Chevaliers for anachronistic reasons that were put into place prior to the French Revolution. While I am intensely grateful for advice from my Francophone friends on Discord, please don't get hung up on the appropriateness of the French grammar. and/or historicity for those terms. Likewise, Sans-Magie is a neologism, so don't worry too much if it doesn't make sense in modern French. It's not like Muggle is a sensible word either.

AN6: Wear a mask! And if you're of age in the U.S., VOTE!

A Series of Tense Conversations, pt 1

Chapter 5: A Series of Tense Conversations, pt 1

Shameless plug! My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now for sale, and I am presently working on the sequel. Also, work has begun on an audio-book for Strangers In Boston. Check out my Discord Server and/or my website for more information: <https://thesinisterman.com/home/>.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Harry Black

and the Resurrection Game

Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.

Chapter 5: A Series of Tense Conversations

The Hog's Head Inn, Hogsmeade

Just before noon

The Hog's Head Inn had the dubious distinction of being the most disreputable inn in Hogsmeade. The distinction was dubious for two reasons. First, there were only two inns in Hogsmeade. Second, it was the only business in Hogsmeade that was in any sense disreputable, as the rest of the town marketed itself as a bright and friendly tourist trap that existed primarily to bilk Hogwarts students out of their

galleons with everything from overpriced chocolates to custom-made quills (for those few students who took inordinate pride in the quality of their quills). Few students ever went to the Hog's Head. Fewer still ever went back a second time, as the staff and management were aggressively discourteous to all their customers but especially those who were still students.

And yet amazingly, the place stayed open year after year, despite the sticky floors, the dirty tables, and the watered-down beer. Even the addition of Argus Filch to the staff wasn't enough to close the place down, and he made it a habit to insult and curse at every single customer without exception. It didn't help that most of the few who did come in had attended Hogwarts while Filch worked there, and the irascible old Squib seemed to have an eidetic memory when it came to what a particular wizard got detention for thirty years earlier and also what the punishment *would* have been if Filch had gotten his way.

Back behind the bar, Aberforth shook his head ruefully as Filch loomed over a cowering Mundungus Fletcher and lectured him on how he'd told Dung when he was a Third Year that he'd never amount to anything. Despite himself, Aberforth smirked. As if Argus Filch had a clue what Mundungus Fletcher actually did for a living. His thoughts on the subject were diverted, however, by the soft "*whoosh*" sound from his back office. He sighed in annoyance.

"Argus!" the large man bellowed. "Take over for me! I need a break!"

Without even looking back, Aberforth passed through the office door and closed and locked it behind him. His guest was already inside waiting for him and sitting in his favorite chair. The preening phoenix who had delivered him to this

room was perched on the back of said chair and probably was getting ash all over it.

"You know," he said contemptuously, "it's considered *rude* to Apparate into someone's private rooms without permission. Doubly so, I reckon, if you're burning your way in with a flaming chicken!"

"So nice to see you as well, brother," replied Albus Dumbledore. "But I thought you would prefer that I not enter through the front door. You did tell me once that I was bad for business."

Aberforth snorted.

"More importantly, it was *you* who sent word that you wished to see me about a '*sensitive matter*.' I assumed from the tenor of your message that you would appreciate my discretion rather than take umbrage for it."

The other man sighed loudly and dropped down into the chair opposite.

"I want you to rehire Argus Filch as your Caretaker," Aberforth said without preamble.

Albus crooked an eyebrow in surprise. "Is his work not up to your standards?" he asked with twinkling eyes. Aberforth fought down the instinct to growl at his older brother.

"One would think that a man who spent decades cleaning a whole bloody castle could at least mop a floor, but apparently not. The bar is actually dirtier than when I hired him. But more than that..."

The wizard trailed off.

"I don't think working here is good for his health," he finally said. "I'm pretty sure he's sneaking liquor when I'm not watching. Also, the work is a lot more physical than what he's used to at the castle where house elves did nearly everything for him. He's an old man, you know."

"As are you and I, Aberforth," Albus replied.

"You and I are wizards, Albus, and powerful ones at that," the younger brother answered before his expression turned sour, "no matter how much mileage you get out of jokes about my lack of skill... *and* all those tasteless insinuations about *bloody goats* !"

He shook his head before continuing. "Our magic sustains us, like it does all powerful wizards who don't ruin their health with the wrong kind of spells. Argus's... condition doesn't allow him that luxury, and I don't want him keeling over dead from lifting something too heavy or just drinking himself to death. Or worse, just... wandering off somewhere! *And* on top of that, I've got business that needs tending away from the Hog's Head. I don't want him left alone here."

"Yes, I'd heard rumors about your new... business opportunity. My congratulations, if that's an appropriate response."

"Dammit, Albus! Just leave my... business affairs out of it."

And then, Aberforth gave his brother a surprisingly malicious look. "Anyway, I'm *sure* you wouldn't want to bear the guilt of being in any way responsible for Filch's untimely demise, now would you?"

With that, Aberforth turned his head towards the painting on the wall, the one that depicted their sister Ariana. She favored both brothers with a sad yet dreamy expression.

Albus sighed loudly. "There is, of course, no guarantee that Argus will even *want* to return to the school."

Aberforth shrugged. "We both know he's only got two options: here and Hogwarts. If his pride won't let him ask for his old job back, perhaps you should take the opportunity to practice a skill that you seldom get to use: a sincere apology. I mean, you did leave the poor man's cat paralyzed and sitting on a shelf collecting dust for months."

"It was an honest... !" Albus paused and shook his head. "Fine! I will speak to Argus with appropriate humility and let him know that Hogwarts cannot possibly survive without him."

Aberforth nodded and started to rise when Albus interrupted him. "But in exchange, perhaps I might prevail upon you to do something for me as well."

The younger Dumbledore glowered and sat back down. "What?" he asked irritably. From a pocket, the Headmaster produced a stack of notes bound in twine which he handed over.

"As we've discussed before, Voldemort has been making use of a clever modification of the Fidelius Charm. It is imperative that we learn the limits of his innovation and quickly. And I imagine if there's anyone in Britain who might know how to break a Fidelius or at least work around it, it's you."

Aberforth reached over and took the notes. "And what makes you think I know more about the Fidelius than you, Albus?"

Albus smiled sadly. "Well, for a start, *I'm* not the one who ensured that outside of ourselves, no one in Wizarding

Britain has any idea that Aberforth Dumbledore and Albus Dumbledore *are brothers* !"

"*Potter Manor*"

Later that afternoon

With some difficulty, Harry crawled out of the back of Bobby Lattimer's mother's Ford Fiesta before stretching his back until he heard it pop. That morning, he'd decided to ride back from Paris to London with Sirius. Ostensibly, that was so godfather and godson could have some bonding time separate from everyone else, and Harry enjoyed his time on the road spent getting to know Sirius better and sharing those parts of his life that he could safely reveal to the Gryffindor.

That said, the real reason for his change of travel plans-which he did *not* share with Sirius-was that in light of what happened at Euro Disney, Harry had no intentions of getting back on a jet plane with a Muggle pilot ever again. "Bob the Evil Scar" had been quiet since the incident that had nearly seen Harry strangled by a Disney park employee and then run over by a rollercoaster, but there was no guarantee it would remain that way. And Harry wasn't about to give it another opportunity to turn any nearby Muggles into potential assassins, least of all a Muggle pilot who could kill him and his friends with ease by crashing the plane before anyone could react.

Of course, the fact that he'd traveled by car meant that he was the last of his friends to arrive at his home. After dropping off Regulus (in his Archie Goodwin identity), Theo, and Neville in London at Heathrow Airport, the Finch-Fletchleys continued on to their home in Scotland. Archie

then Side-Apparated his two young charges back to the Manor, where Amy and Lady Augusta were waiting. Later, after Harry and Sirius finally arrived, all seven of them sat down for a welcome home feast presented by Buttercup.

Afterwards, Harry and his family and guests retired to the manor's great hall where the Floo was located. Just before eight o'clock, the rest of Harry's guests arrived by Floo: Severus Snape, Andromeda and Ted Tonks, and (in a surprise to some people) Hermione Granger. As Dobby served drinks to everyone, Harry took his place in front of the fireplace and steeled himself. Present in the room was everyone he no longer wished to have any secrets from-except, of course, for those secrets that he *couldn't* share. But first, he had an apology to make.

"Before we begin... I hate to do this because I trust everyone here, and I don't want any of you to think otherwise. But... I know things. Some of those things, I've shared with some of you. Other things, I've shared with others of you. But they're all incredibly important things to know, and I want all the people I trust completely to be on the same page. I know that goes against everything Slytherins are supposed to stand for, but I recently had a reminder that secrets can sometimes get people killed. The things I want to share... I think they're going to be very important later, both for all of us and maybe the whole world. But in order to preserve the safety of everyone in this room, and likely the safety of a lot of people not in this room, I will need everyone to take a fairly stringent Oath of Secrecy. It's not quite an Unbreakable Vow; I can't ask that of you. But definitely the strongest Oath of Secrecy available that won't flat-out kill you if you breach it."

The Slytherin was relieved when no one objected, and at his request, Regulus swore everyone to an oath not to reveal

anything discussed in this room during this present meeting without the express consent of Harry Black. According to Regulus, he'd found the oath in one of the books in the Prince's Lair that Harry hadn't gotten to yet. It was a simple but powerful oath, and its effects were similar to the nonconsensual oath that protected the secrets of the Prince's Lair and the even Prince's very existence. Although Regulus and Lucius had both limited their own coteries to Slytherins, past Princes had used this oath to bind non-Slytherins into their inner circles, though they still couldn't bring such outsiders into the Lair itself.

In fact, in terms of potency, the oath was very close to the one that he and Sirius had both sworn to Arcturus Black as children before being told about the Anathema Codex. Which was important, since magic from the Codex was on the agenda for discussion. Harry took a deep breath before diving in.

"Okay, let's start with the basics. I was born on July 31, 1980 as one of the twin sons of Lily and James Potter. At some point before our birth... a prophecy was made." At that, Snape stiffened in his chair, but Harry continued.

"I can't relate any details about this Prophecy except to say that Voldemort became aware of part of it, and based on what he'd heard, he concluded that either I or Jim Potter could be a threat to him. Or possibly Neville, but I reckon he decided it would be more efficient to hit the Potters first and kill two baby birds with one stone. The Potters were protected under a Fidelius. But by that point, Peter Pettigrew was already a Death Eater, and he tricked James and Sirius here into making him the Potter Secret Keeper. And then Pettigrew promptly told the Secret to Voldemort."

Sirius looked away despite himself. Andi reached over and patted him on the knee.

"Voldemort attacked the Potters at Godric's Hollow on Halloween of 1981. He stunned James and Lily and then tried to use the Killing Curse on Jim. Most likely, I would have been next. But something went wrong, some weird anomaly affecting Jim that caused the curse to backfire and destroy Voldemort. It didn't kill Voldemort though because he used dark magic called Horcruxes to give himself a form of immortality. A Horcrux is a magical object of some kind into which a fragment of a person's soul has been entrapped. It prevents the person from passing over after death and allows them to function as a very powerful ghost with the added possibility of resurrecting the person if the right rituals are performed."

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise. She was the only one who he'd never discussed Horcruxes with at all. And while the Azkabal was aware that there were actual rituals which would need to be performed before Voldemort could be fully resurrected, they weren't sure what magic was required. The Black copy of the Anathema Codex was locked up in Chevenoir, the ancestral home of House Black; the Wilkes copy was missing; and the Longbottom copy was inaccessible until Neville became Lord Conditional after turning fifteen.

"We have so far destroyed three of his known Horcruxes," Harry continued. "The diary of Tom Riddle that possessed Ron Weasley during my second year, Helga Hufflepuff's Cup, and Salazar Slytherin's Locket. But we don't know how many Horcruxes he has total and don't know where the remaining ones are."

Harry paused to prepare himself.

"All of you know most of that, although the Horcruxes are new to you, Hermione. But there are things most of you don't know. Things about Voldemort. And things about *me*. First things first. Everyone knows that Voldemort was the leader of the Death Eaters, and his plan was to use them to take over Wizarding Britain to further the cause of Pureblood supremacy. Except... that's a *lie*."

Most of those listening to Harry's speech were surprised by that claim, but not Amy and Theo who were both on hand when he first revealed Voldemort's link with Rian O'Grady.

"Lord Voldemort was born Tom Marvolo Riddle, the last known descendant of the Ancient and Noble House of Gaunt. Except by the time he came along, House Gaunt was both impoverished and inbred to the point of insanity. Riddle was the son of Merope Gaunt, the squib daughter of the last Lord Gaunt, and an as-yet unidentified Muggle with the last name Riddle, which makes him either a Halfblood or a Muggleborn depending on how you want to consider it. Lucius Malfoy is researching to find who Tom Riddle's father was, but he hasn't been able to yet."

"Where is Lucius, by the way?" Snape asked.

Harry coughed diplomatically. "As I said, this meeting is for all the people I *trust completely*. I like Lucius Malfoy, and he's done a lot for us that he'll probably never get credit for. But trust completely? Nope."

Snape nodded. "Fair enough."

"Anyway, believe it or not," Harry continued, "when Tom first arrived at Hogwarts, he was an advocate of Muggleborn rights despite being a Slytherin and, in fact, being an actual Heir of Slytherin through the Gaunt line. The 1943 Chamber of Secrets affair wasn't actually an attack on Muggleborns at

all. It was meant to stir up sympathy for Muggleborns while turning everyone against the blood purists of the day. But everything went wrong when Tom accidentally killed Myrtle Warren instead of petrifying her. He was so distraught that he tried to use Occlumency to shut down his feelings of guilt and grief, but he accidentally destroyed his capacity to feel love as well. The result was the man we call Lord Voldemort, although he wouldn't be called that by the public for decades yet."

"Waitaminute," Sirius exclaimed. "Voldemort started off as a *supporter* of Muggleborn rights?"

Harry shook his head. "He started that way as a student, but after the Chamber of Secrets incident and the loss of his empathy, he changed his agenda. Publicly, he cut ties with his former Muggleborn friends, but he secretly won the loyalty of a nucleus of Pureblood followers. I don't know who his original inner circle was, but I know it included Boruslav Lestrangle and Augustus Rookwood, both of whom were his schoolmates. But other Purebloods of the day still looked down on him for his blood heritage, including Cantankerous Nott Jr., Abraxas Malfoy, and Walburga Black. After leaving Hogwarts, Tom disappeared from public view for several years, but he later returned under the fake identify of Lord Voldemort, who presented himself as a powerful wizard, a Parselmouth, a master of the psychic arts, and the one true Heir of Slytherin. He even told Abraxas that he'd been the one to murder Tom Riddle as a way of gaining his support."

Harry paused and braced himself, as the next bit would be a shock to some people.

"*Except...* while Tom Riddle was courting Purebloods under the name Lord Voldemort, he was *also* using at least one other fake identity for a different purpose. Under the name

Rian O'Grady, Tom infiltrated Alexander McAvity's Muggleborn Rights movement. Then, he somehow engineered the death of Minister Nobby Leach and, I suspect, arranged for McAvity himself to be banished from Britain. That radicalized McAvity's remaining followers, and Voldemort, as O'Grady, used them to perform terrorist attacks against *Purebloods* in order to frighten them into supporting Voldemort without anyone realizing they were *the same person* ."

Theo spoke up. "The Dark Lord's last public act as Rian O'Grady was to assassinate Cantankerous Nott Jr., my grandfather. That paved the way for my father, Tiberius Nott, to become Lord Nott and also led to him becoming a Death Eater."

"I remember Mother ranting about Rian O'Grady and the death of Cantankerous Nott," Sirius marveled. "She wanted every Muggleborn in the country rounded up after that. Harry, how much of this have you confirmed?"

Harry squirmed slightly. "Not as much as I'd like, to be honest. Certainly not to the point of proving it in a court or even getting it published in a credible newspaper. But we know the Death Eaters have this odd affinity for anagrams. Tom Marvolo Riddle is an anagram for *I am Lord Voldemort*, and *Ariana McFlossy* is an anagram for Narcissa Malfoy. Well, it just so happens that Rian O'Grady is an anagram for *Dorian Gray*, which was a book by Riddle's favorite Muggle author. It was about a man with an enchanted object that held part of his soul and made him immortal."

Hermione gasped. "You think *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was about a man and his Horcrux?"

"I have no reason to think that Oscar Wilde was a wizard or that he knew about magic or Horcruxes," Harry replied. "I just know about the anagram and the fact that there's no record of Rian O'Grady before he showed up in the 1960's and no sign of him after he assassinated Theo's grandfather."

"Actually, Oscar Wilde might *very well* have heard stories of such things," Lady Augusta said. "As I recall the family prattle passed around from my school days, Mr. Wilde was briefly the suitor of one Florence Balcombe whose mother was Mina Balcombe Née Crouch. Mina was my great-aunt and also a Squib. Her daughter Florence, who was also without magic, was courted by Oscar Wilde in her youth, but she eventually married a different Muggle by the name of Bram Stoker, who I imagine Miss Granger at least has heard of. Apparently, Florence foolishly shared with her husband some wizarding tales that she definitely shouldn't have, one of which led to the publication of a novel of some note entitled *Dracula*. And that caused *all kinds* of problems between the ICW, the British and Transylvanian Ministries of Magic, and House Crouch. So truthfully, I wouldn't be the *least bit surprised* if Florence had at some point told Mr. Wilde a garbled tale involving a Horcrux."

Augusta shook her head disapprovingly and clucked her tongue. "Gossip! Such a vulgar habit. I'm proud to say I've never felt the need to indulge in it."

Neville's eyes widened comically, but he said nothing.

"Waitaminute!" Hermione exclaimed. "Count Dracula... is *real* ?!"

"No, no, no!" Harry snapped. "We are not getting sidetracked into a discussion about vampires. They're not even in the

top twenty things we need to worry about right now!"

"Right, sorry," Hermione said contritely before turning to Augusta and mouthing "*We'll talk later.*"

"Let me make sure I'm keeping up with all this," said Ted Tonks. "I'm a Hufflepuff, after all. We're not built for all this chicanery. You're saying that You-Know-Who was actually behind *both sides* of the blood purity debate? And he spent the '50s, '60s, and '70s driving both sides to extremism in order to inflame the other side? But... *why?*"

Harry shrugged. "That's the part I haven't figured out yet, which is why I'm sharing what I know with people cleverer than me. But I know Voldemort's not just a blood purist. If he was, he probably had enough votes in the Wizengamot at the height of his powers to just *legislate* Wizarding Britain into a Pureblood dictatorship. But... he didn't."

Hermione raised her hand as if she were back in class, which caused Harry to smile despite the mood of the room.

"But Harry-even if... Tom Riddle or whoever we're going to call him was playing both sides against each other, well, there hasn't really been a pro-Muggleborn side to speak of since I've been alive. Did his plan, whatever it was, *change*?"

"Oh, it *changed* alright," said Archie said. "By the bastard *dying* ! After Jim Potter defeated him in 1981, it *should* have led to the exposure of his Death Eaters and the imprisonment of a sizeable percentage of the Wizengamot. Only by framing Sirius for using the Imperius against them were those Death Eaters able to escape punishment, return to government service, and, as Harry put it, advance the Pureblood agenda by legitimate means. Ironically, the Death

Eaters achieved a lot more of their political goals after the Dark Lord's fall!"

"We're getting off track, I think," Harry said. "Let's get back to 1981. As we all know, Jim somehow destroyed Voldemort's physical form. But what nobody knew at the time was... I was also affected."

Silence. Harry paused and waited to see if some strange horror from beyond the confines of Reality started pouring through the walls to register its disapproval of Harry discussing this topic. Sensing nothing of the sort, Harry took a deep breath and soldiered on.

"Ted, Andi, Professor Snape, my... Muggle problem... started *that night* . And it's connected with *this* ."

He pushed his hair back and pointed at his scar.

"I thought that scar was the product of falling masonry or something, wasn't it?" Ted asked in confusion.

"Muggle problem?" Amy interrupted in confusion. "*What* Muggle problem?"

"*I'm getting there* !" Harry snapped in exasperation before reining in his emotions. "Sorry, Amy. It's a... sore subject."

He took a breath and then continued his story. "After Jim destroyed Voldemort's physical body, we were both taken to St. Mungo's, where the Healers came to the very strong but incorrect belief that I was a Squib. They also speculated that I might have been turned into a Squib because of whatever Jim did, and so it might not be safe for me to stay around him. And based on those recommendations, James and Lily sent me to live with her in-laws, Petunia and Vernon Dursley."

Immediately, Sirius leaned forward to interrupt, but Harry put his hand up to silence him.

"At that point, Lily had made up with Petunia, and according to everything Lily knew at the time, the Dursleys would take care of me but also let the Potters know if I showed any magic. Instead, they..."

To his own embarrassment, Harry's voice suddenly cracked, and he paused to reinforce his Occlumency.

"They mistreated me. Horribly. But that's not important right now..."

"NOT IMPORTANT?!" Sirius exclaimed as he jumped up from his chair.

"No, Sirius! It's *not important* ! What *is* important is the *reason* for it! Professor Snape knows, and so do the Tonkses. It wasn't just a matter of the Dursleys being cruel monsters. There's... something about *me* specifically. Some supernatural aura that affects Muggles. It makes them distrust me. It makes them inclined to get angry at me. And after long term exposure, it makes them dangerous to me."

He paused and took a deep breath.

"Or at least, that's how we all *thought* it worked," he said ruefully.

Andromeda narrowed her eyes. "Explain, Harry."

Harry paused to collect his thoughts. "There was... an incident at Hogwarts a few months back. I can't give you any details, but... I could feel it."

Everyone stared at the boy who was normally almost unnaturally self-possessed but who now seemed overcome by emotion. Specifically, fear.

"Breathe, Harry," Snape said softly. "Breathe and then tell us. You could feel... *what*?"

"It's not just an aura," Harry finally said after a long pause. "It's... intelligent. I was put in a situation in which I was nearly overcome with anger at someone and... I felt ***IT***. A force inside me that has some level of intelligence and wanted to take control of me. That... or see me dead. I was barely able to beat it back."

He paused again and barked out a laugh. "Since then, I've taken to calling it '*Bob*.' My way of thinking about it without panicking, I suppose. Anyway, after the incident I mentioned, it seemed to go dormant. I was even able to interact with Muggles freely. I spent several days with Justin Finch-Fletchley's parents and we all got along fine. His father even apologized for how he was rude to me in the past. And I spent all of yesterday morning in an amusement park packed full of Muggles without incident until..."

Harry looked over at Sirius with an anxious expression. "Sirius, please don't be mad at me for not telling you right away, but I wanted to make sure you were back here first with the Tonkses on hand in case hearing about what happened upset you."

"What happened, Harry?" Sirius asked with quiet intensity.

Harry scanned the room. Theo, Neville, and Archie were all giving supportive looks, but none of the others knew what had happened to him or how terrifying it was. If he weren't already an Occlumens of remarkable skill, he was sure he'd still be traumatized.

"At one point, while we were at the park, I and all the underage wizards were separated from Archie and Gunther. We were on the same rollercoaster but in different carts. They were only a minute or so behind us, but... that's all it took. We were just kids, on our own, with no wands. And immediately after the ride started up, my scar started hurting terribly."

"Not your *head*, Harry?" Ted inquired. "Your scar itself?"

Neville spoke up. "It wasn't just hurting him, Healer Tonks. His scar just started... *bleeding* ."

"The pain got worse and worse until the ride came to a stop. Then, when the park attendant came over to see what the matter was... as soon as he got close, he suddenly went berserk and tried to *strangle me* . And it wasn't just one of them. *Every Muggle* within about twenty feet was affected, and they all mobbed me and eventually tried to throw me onto the tracks so that the cart Archie and Gunther were in would run over me."

Sirius was aghast and shot out of his chair.

"WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME?!" he bellowed to Archie in a rage before breaking into a fit of coughing.

"Most likely because he didn't want you to have this sort of reaction," Andi said before physically shoving him back into his chair and handing him a potion she'd produced from a bag. "Now sit down and let the medicine do its work!"

"So it was the same effect that provoked Vernon Dursley into attacking you in the summer of 1992?" Snape asked while keeping a side-eye on Sirius.

"Yes, Professor, but a lot stronger."

"Tell them about the eyes, Harry," Theo directed, and Harry described how the eyes of every affected Muggle turned blood-red.

"A classic sign of possession," Ted murmured. "Though I've never heard of a *mass* possession before. I hadn't even thought that was possible. But I still don't see what your scar had to do with it?"

Harry pinched his brow with his fingers. "Everybody, just look at my scar for a second. Does it, you know, *resemble anything*?"

Everyone muttered in response to the question. Exasperated, Harry finally grabbed a sheet of parchment and a quill and jotted down a familiar lightning bolt pattern before holding the sheet up.

"Anyone who's had Ancient Runes, do you know what this is?"

"Sowilo," several people replied almost at once. Harry then held the parchment up next to his scar.

"Right! So does anyone think the scar looks familiar *NOW*?!"

The whole room went silent as everyone's brows furrowed in concentration.

"Your scar... appears to resemble... the Sowilo rune," Snape said with obvious difficulty.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Wonderful," he muttered angrily to himself, "the master Occlumens can kinda, sorta see it. It doesn't *resemble* the Sowilo, Professor, it *is* Sowilo. And either it was carved into my head through the backlash of

whatever Jim did or... or I reckon it must be something Voldemort did to me *before* he tried to kill Jim."

Neville raised his hand. "Um, for those of us who didn't take Ancient Runes... what *is* Sowilo?"

"It's the rune of raw and ultimate power, Neville," Hermione said gravely. "Any enchanted item meant to power itself must incorporate Sowilo, often multiple times."

Harry nodded. "And perhaps more importantly, the Sowilo rune is also the wand movement for the Killing Curse."

The room went silent again. Snape stared intently at Harry's scar as if trying to commit it to memory.

"Extraordinary," he finally said. "It must be some form of magical occlusion. I can see that the scar is in the form of Sowilo, but only if I focus all my attention on it and Occlude as hard as I can. It is quite likely that everyone else in this room will forget about your scar's occult significance as soon as we all leave tonight."

"Which presents a bit of a problem when it comes to medical treatment, I should think," Ted added ruefully.

"Yeah," Harry said irritably. "Professor Snape, I assume you can use the Hidden Mind technique to hide this information in a secondary thought-stream. You should probably do so." He paused and frowned. "Because judging from all the looks I'm seeing around the room, you're the only person other than me who's ever even heard of it."

And sure enough, when the assembled group left the topic of Harry's scar to further discuss Voldemort's Horcruxes, he could almost sense the point at which each of them simply stopped thinking about the significance of a rune of power

carved into his skin. He and Snape briefly made eye contact, and the older wizard sent a psychic reassurance that he still remembered the information if not fully consciously.

After a good twenty minutes going over what the group had discussed so far, Hermione spoke up. "Perhaps we should move on. We've talked about You-Know-Who's secret identities and hidden soul anchors, as well as Harry's *Muggle problem* . Is there *anything else* I should know?"

Almost absent-mindedly, Neville spoke up. "Um, Archie Goodwin is actually Sirius's brother, Regulus, who is a Metamorphmagus who faked his own death back before any of us were born. He pretended to be Professor Lockhart when we were Second Years. Oh, and nearly everyone in this room was involved somehow in the Azkaban break-out, and Bellatrix Black is still alive and is a surprisingly nice person."

"NEVILLE!" several different people exclaimed simultaneously.

"What?" he asked in surprise. "Everyone else in the room already knew all that, and she's under a vow anyway. Harry did say he wanted us all on the same page, right?"

"It's okay," Harry said. "He's right. Show her, Reg."

Archie gave a loud huff and then shook his head violently to resume his true form. To his surprise, Hermione gave him a rather intimidating glare.

"And you were also Professor Lockhart?" she asked frostily.

"Er, yes? Is that a problem?"

She folded her arms. "As I recall, you *left* Hogwarts weeks before final exams, *with the end result that we all got a*

pass-fail grade in DADA for the year regardless of how much effort we put in !"

Harry smirked. "I'm sorry, Reg. I should have realized that telling Hermione the truth about how you negatively affected her class placement would have made her your mortal enemy."

Hermione glowered at him. "Fine. I'll let go for now that crime against education. Is there anything *e/*se you want to tell everyone, Harry?" she said while giving Harry a pointed look indicating her belief that there was.

He sighed again. "Yes, I suppose so. I told you all that there was a True Prophecy concerning Voldemort and Jim Potter, though I can't reveal its contents. I *can* share with you... the *other two* Prophecies in play at the moment. Theo, Hermione, if you would?"

And while the rest of the group sat aghast, Theo shared the 1790 Potter Prophecy in its entirety. Regulus frowned at the notion of the Prince of Slytherin title being revealed in a prophecy to outsiders, particular to outsiders like House Potter and its 200-year history of Gryffindor Sortings and anti-Slytherin bias, a bias which suddenly made a lot more sense. Meanwhile, as soon as Theo was finished, Harry nodded to Hermione, who recited Sybil Trelawney's Prophecy from earlier in the year.

"So, the Something Something is actually just called the *Prince of Slytherin* ?" Hermione asked when she was finished.

"Yes," Harry replied before noting her expression. "Is there a problem with that?"

"No, no. To be honest, I was just expecting something more arcane. Or maybe just... *fancier* . "

Harry rolled his eyes and then noticed that Snape was fuming.

"I was a Slytherin for seven years," he said angrily, "and then Slytherin Head of House for thirteen! *Why have I never heard of any Prince of Slytherin ?*"

"Because when you were Sorted, Lucius Malfoy was a Seventh Year Prince, and he didn't allow firsties into his inner circle," Regulus answered blandly. "And when I became Prince during my Sixth Year, I aggressively disliked you." Then, he shrugged. "Sorry."

Snape glared at Regulus but said nothing.

"Right then," Harry said with his arms outstretched. "That's where we are. I am the Prince of Slytherin as of this past March. I am also under the effects of an Oath of Enmity against my twin brother, and he is under a different magical compulsion to hate me, so that's pretty much the two who should be as one set against each other in reckless hate. I can neither deny nor confirm that I have a literal throne made of basalt and silver, but I can admit that because of my '*blameless decision* ' to spare Peter Pettigrew and turn him over to the Aurors instead of killing or letting Reg do so, he and Augustus Rookwood escaped custody and are likely now working to resurrect Voldemort, whose plans, I assume, include becoming a Dark God and destroying the world."

Everyone in the room stared at the boy. "So," he continued, "if anyone has any ideas on what to do about that, it would be... swell."

Later...

The Azkabal continued its discussion of the two prophecies for another hour before calling it a night. Those who were not staying as Harry's guests made their way home via Floo, though the Tonkses stayed behind to, as Andi put it, "have a few words with Sirius about treatment." They did reassure Harry that it was nothing serious, and the boy followed Theo and Amy upstairs towards their respective bedrooms. Once the children were gone, Sirius turned to Regulus with an angry expression.

"I cannot *believe* that Harry was nearly *killed*, and you didn't even tell me! He's my godson, for Merlin's sake!"

Regulus shrugged. "I know he's your godson, Sirius. But he's also emancipated. In the eyes of Magic and the Law, he is a grown man in nearly every way that matters. He asked me to remain silent and let him be the one to tell you, and he promised to do so once we were all back home and has, in fact, done so. My trust in him was justified, and I don't have any regrets about doing as he asked."

"Because he's the Prince of Slytherin?" Sirius asked bitingly.

"In part," the younger Black admitted. "I do have some experience on that topic, after all. Enough to give the benefit of the doubt to someone who has earned the title."

Sirius did a double take. "Wait... you told Snape that you were a Prince back when we were at Hogwarts! Why didn't you ever tell me?!"

Reg stared at his brash Gryffindor sibling for several seconds. "I won't even dignify that with a sarcastic comment," he finally said.

"And while I knew nothing specific about any Prince of Slytherin during my school days," Andromeda added. "I'm nevertheless glad Harry insisted on waiting and Regulus acquiesced. I shudder to think what might have happened if you'd learned about what nearly happened while you were still in France or, worse, on your way back in a Muggle conveyance!"

"I'm doing better, Andi," Sirius said almost in a sulk.

"You are, Sirius," Ted said gravely. "You've come a long way, and you will continue to improve so long as you follow your Healers' advice. But you do have one glaring area where your health is still a concern, and perhaps it's time we got it out in the open."

"What do you mean?" Sirius asked, while beside him, Regulus grew concerned at Ted's tone.

Ted looked to Andi, and she nodded for him to continue.

"Based on our observations, you survived Azkaban with your mental faculties mostly intact due to three factors. One was your Animagus training. Even if the Anti-Animagus wards prevented you from changing form, you still benefited from the dual-mind properties of your Animagery. Another factor was simply your knowledge of your own complete innocence. It provided you with a single fixed memory that the Dementors could not steal away, and that provided a bulwark against other memories being stolen."

Ted paused to prepare himself.

"And the *third* factor was your intense guilt over, in your mind, failing to protect your godson and fulfill your obligations to him. The punitive elements of being imprisoned with Dementors were weakened because, in a

real sense, you were already punishing yourself for your perceived failures as a godfather."

"Well that's because I did fail as Harry's godfather!" Sirius snapped. "But I'm free now, so I can make up for that."

"Yes, Sirius," Andi said. "But what you don't understand is that now that you're free and actually able to look after Harry, the fact that he doesn't need you to do so is causing that very devotion to work against you."

Sirius looked at her in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

She put her hand on his shoulder. "What I'm saying is that whenever you find yourself in a situation where you feel that you've let Harry down or not been there when he needed you, it can trigger a flashback to similar feelings you experienced while you in Azkaban. Muggle Healers recognize a condition they call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which triggers panic attacks when reminded even indirectly of past trauma. But for wizards, it's worse because your own magic can cause you to *physically* experience such trauma once more instead of just mentally. At worst, it might cause a total relapse like it did last December when you tried to Apparate and it triggered a nearly fatal flashback to your prior confinement."

Andi looked at him sadly. "I know you want to act as a parental figure to Harry. I certainly wish someone could fulfill that role. But it does Harry no good to bond with you as a father figure only to lose you while he is still in his teens. And I am warning you-that may well happen if you continue to let yourself become overwrought because of Harry's circumstances."

At the top of the stairs, Harry stood leaning against the bannister with his head bowed and the Black Wand clutched in his hand. Silently, he dismissed the Supersensory Charm, and the voices of the Blacks and the Tonkses faded to a distant murmuring.

"It's okay," he thought to himself. "He's just someone else I have to look out for. I saved Amy. I saved Regulus. I can save Sirius. That's what family is for."

Harry turned and made his way to his bedroom but found that he was too wired for sleep, even though he (and Sirius) both had big days ahead of them. Instead of going straight to bed, he sat down at his small writing desk and opened the drawer. Inside, there was an old deck of cards, the same one that Serena Zabini had used to divine his future the night before. As they were leaving the Lestrangle Mausoleum the night before, he had idly mentioned to Lady Serena an interest in learning more about Tarot readings, and she'd freely given him the deck.

"I was going to throw them out anyway," she'd said. "I never reuse a deck after it has provided me with a momentous reading. Superstitious of me, I suppose, but what can I say. I am Sicilian."

Serena had assured Harry that the deck was not magical at all. It was, in fact, a common mass-produced Rider-Waite Tarot deck she purchased from a Barnes & Noble bookstore in Manhattan a few years earlier. Despite those assurances, he still regarded it warily. Then, he shrugged at his own hesitation and reached back into the drawer for the copy of *Unfogging the Future* which Dobby had picked up for him from Flourish & Blotts. He turned to the chapter entitled "Cartomancy for Beginners" and began to read until he finally felt sleepy and retired for the night.

Before finally turning out the lights, he took one last look at the plum-colored Wizengamot robes that Dobby had helpfully left hanging from a hook next to his closet door. He sighed and closed his eyes. The next day would be a busy day indeed.

2 August 1994

The Wizengamot Chamber

"Let Magic itself hear my oath and sanctify it," said Hadrian Remus Black Lord Wilkes in a confident voice. "I stand in unity with the Wizengamot and the families both Noble and Ancient and Noble who are its foundation. Let my magic be bent to our collective purpose and so too the magic of my family and all who come after me lest they be forsworn and suffer expulsion. From the unification of my family magic with that of my peers, let there arise a deeper magic that is greater than the sum of its parts. From this day forward, I hereby submit myself to the will of the Wizengamot as expressed through its majority. I hereby accept the judgment of the will of the Wizengamot as expressed through its laws. I vow to act with the Wizengamot, and when we act as one, so shall we perform miracles. This I swear upon my life and unto the ending of the world. So mote it be!"

"SO MOTE IT BE!" the entire chamber replied in unison, though some with more enthusiasm than others. Harry breathed in deeply in order to combat the lightheadedness he felt. When his godfather swore his oath as Lord Black moments earlier, Harry had felt the same stifling wave of magic that he'd experienced months earlier when Justin Finch-Fletchley swore his own oath as the Prince Heir. It was

the product of so many powerful wizards and witches from so many powerful families reaffirming their unity.

But it was nothing compared to what Harry felt when he swore his own oath as Lord of an Ancient and Noble House. For a moment, his head grew dizzy at the sensation of being a part of such incredible magical power. Briefly, Harry even thought he could feel the ley lines that flowed into the building and maintained the enormous magical infrastructure of the Ministry building before heading out again across the land according to the Wizengamot's dictates.

After taking a second to clear his head, Harry retired from the podium and took his place in the Wilkes Seat next to Artie, who shook his hand warmly. Nearby, Sirius Lord Black beamed at his godson, while Lucius Lord Malfoy gave him a respectful nod. Harry tried to avoid looking at some of the other lords and ladies who gave him far colder looks, though he was surprised to see Daphne Greengrass, the Greengrass Heir, sitting with her father, Daniel. Of course, it was not uncommon for Family Heads to allow their Heirs to sit with them, especially during the summer, as a learning experience. In particular, House Greengrass, by tradition, did not rely on Seneschals or proxies, and so Daphne at some point would be expected to learn what her eventual duties as Lady Greengrass would be. What puzzled Harry, however, was the way she kept giving him appraising glances and then leaning in to whisper things to her father.

After Sirius and Harry completed their Oaths of Unity, the Chief Warlock opened the floor up to a special report by Barty Crouch, the Director of the Department of International Cooperation. The venerable diplomat and official began with a terse welcome to Sirius Black to the Wizengamot. Sirius nodded politely but said nothing.

Crouch's somewhat tyrannical reign at the DMLE in 1981 was not the only reason for Sirius's false incarceration nor even a major reason, but it certainly didn't help.

"Lords and Ladies, Honored Guests, and Citizens," Crouch began. "In one week's time will begin an event years in the making. The Quidditch World Cup will return to this blessed isle once more!"

Immediately, Crouch's speech was interrupted by tumultuous applause and cheering such that Dumbledore had to repeatedly bang his gavel to restore order. Even Harry found the excitement a bit much, particularly since this was the *second* speech on the topic today-Ludo Bagman had *already* talked about the schedule for the World Cup for over an hour, and Harry wondered what Crouch thought he had to add. As it turned out, nothing at all, at least where the World Cup was concerned.

"*But*- now that the negotiations are finally complete, I can officially announce that the Quidditch World Cup is not the only sporting event scheduled for the coming year! For 1994 will mark the return of a tradition dating back centuries! It is my great pleasure to formally announce to you the recommencement of the Triwizard Tournament!"

This time, the applause was far more perfunctory, as few people present had any idea what the Triwizard Tournament was, and the tepid response visibly annoyed Crouch. He went on to provide an overview of the Tournament's storied, if lurid, history.

At the heart of the Triwizard Tournament was the Goblet of Fire, an ancient and powerful relic from the age of high magic. When the ancient wizard-ruled societies grew weary of constant bloody warfare that left the winners little better

off than the losers, the great magical empires of the day resolved to settle their conflicts less destructively, specifically by resolving disputes through trial by individual combat rather than competing armies. To ensure fairness, wizards in the Time of Legends (long before the era of the Hogwarts Founders or even Merlin himself) fashioned the Goblet of Fire. Rather than allow conflicts to lead to ruinous war, the opposing leaders would each submit the names of their greatest warriors to fight on the behalf of their entire empires.

"Once activated," Crouch explained, "the Goblet would select Champions from each side, and those Champions would then take part in competitions devised by the Goblet. The very nature of the Goblet magically ensured that the chosen Champions would be forced to compete to the best of their ability, that those tasked with putting together the Challenges would do so to the Goblet's specifications and without attempting to manipulate the outcome, that those selected as judges would do so fairly, and that the leaders who invoked the Goblet's power would abide by the results of the trial without attempting to cheat. The Goblet of Fire was used to settle wizarding conflicts for untold centuries until the rise of the modern nation-states and the eventual subjugation of wizards to Muggle authorities that made such magical trial by combat disfavored."

As he listened to Crouch's history lesson, Harry's head perked up at Crouch's comments about the "subjugation of wizards to Muggle authorities." It was an interesting insight into the man's political leanings. For someone who was such an outspoken enemy of Voldemort, it was odd to note his apparent anti-Muggle bias. Harry briefly wondered what the man had thought of Grindelwald back in the day.

"By the time of the Norman Conquest and the birth of the Wizengamot, the Goblet of Fire had fallen out of use... *until* the 13th Century, when the great magical schools of Europe resolved to pit themselves against one another in a spirit of competition. And facilitate it, they chose the Goblet of Fire, which by then had come into the possession of the government of Magical France. After extensive negotiations, Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang agreed to terms under which the Goblet would be allowed to select Champions from the best students of each school. These Champions would then compete against one another in three Challenges. This became known as the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and every five years, the best and brightest wizards and witches from across Europe pitted themselves against one another and against the most demanding tasks that the Goblet could devise for them, to prove to each other and to the world which school produced the greatest wizards and witches!"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Lucius Malfoy. "Until that unfortunate business in 1793 when *they all died!* "

Dumbledore banged his gavel. "Lord Malfoy, your remarks are out of order," he said, even though his expression suggested that he readily agreed with them.

"Then, I formally rise to a point of order," said Malfoy as he stood to address a seething Crouch. "What, other than scholastic bragging rights, is the point of reviving the Tri-Wizard Tournament? How much is it going to cost us? And what steps-if *any* -will the individuals responsible for this Tournament be taking to prevent any of the *best and brightest* of British Wizarding youth being brutally killed in what historically been best described as a bloodsport?"

Dumbledore banged his gavel again to restore order. "Lord Malfoy, I understand your concerns, and when this proposal was first brought before me in my capacity as representative to the ICW, I shared them. However, I can reassure you that every step is being taken to prevent the Goblet from assigning any Challenges that might be deemed dangerous. While we will not precisely be able to decide the nature of the Challenges, a blue-ribbon panel of experts will design the challenge parameters which will be fed into the Goblet to ensure that the three tasks, while able to push the Champions to their limits, will not be inherently life-threatening. And certainly nowhere near the danger levels of 1793."

"Moreover," said Ludo Bagman as he rose to be recognized. "While we expect the three Champions to all be legal adults, there will be plenty of activities for students other than the Champions. We're still working out the details, but we plan on an interscholastic dueling competition, an academic decathlon which will test students of all ages on Transfiguration, Charms, Potions and other school subject, and even a number of exhibition Quidditch matches!"

The prospect of more Quidditch seemed to fill Bagman with glee, but Severus Snape, in his capacity as Regent Prince, was less enthralled by the game. He raised his wand to address the Chief Warlock.

"Mr. Bagman said that he *expects* the Champions to all be legal adults. Can you expand on that? I have no desire to see my ward, a Fourth Year student who is Heir to a Noble House, drawn into this foolishness."

"We're still ironing out the details, Regent Prince," said Dumbledore. "But we will be limiting potential Champions either to legal adults or to upper level students who have

parental approval. This is both to eliminate even the slightest chance of danger to any competitors and also to reduce the chance of underage students seeking to enter because they are dazzled by the prospects of winning the tournament, which, aside from significant fame and recognition, will also carry a cash prize of 1000 galleons! In any case, the Champions will be chosen by the Goblet itself based on which students it believes will best be able to compete, and so it is hardly likely to choose an underage competitor."

Meanwhile, back on 4 Privet Drive, one such underage competitor who had been listening to the proceedings on the Wizarding Wireless while working on homework, nearly shot out of his chair.

"Did you hear that, Mum?!" Jim exclaimed. "A thousand galleons!"

"No, Jim," she said without even looking up from the Potioneer's Monthly she was reading.

"But Mum!"

"You're too young, Jim, and your father and I have no intention of signing a permission slip for you to enter into some insane tournament with a history of getting its competitors wounded or killed!"

"But... !"

"No, Jim!" Lily said firmly. "Don't bother asking again!"

Jim stared at his mother for several seconds. Indeed, long enough for Lily to look up from her magazine and take note of his expression.

"... Fine," he said quietly before picking up his books and heading for the door.

"Jim!" the boy's mother called after him. "Don't be that way!"

"What way, Mum?" he said without looking back. "You've made your decision, and my feelings don't enter into it. As usual. I'm going upstairs to get some peace and quiet."

The boy stormed out of the room. Lily sighed and decided not to go after him.

"Let him get it out of his system, " she thought to herself. "It's nothing to be worried about anyway. "

An hour later, the Wizengamot meeting had finally ended, and Harry, Lucius, and Sirius made their way to the Wilkes Office, where Regulus waited for them in the antechamber in his Archie Goodwin persona. In a few weeks, the antechamber would be a fully furnished office for Harry's personal assistant, which was *probably* going to be Titus Mitchell. Sirius had taken a liking to Bobby Lattimer, while Titus had been a Slytherin Prefect at the time of Harry's ascension to Prince, so at least that was one less secret he had to worry about protecting. At the moment, however, the antechamber was rather spartan with just a few chairs and, surprisingly, a full-length mirror which had been delivered at Harry's request.

"Are you sure you want to do this today, Harry?" Archie asked. "There's no harm in waiting."

"A preposterous sentiment," Lucius snapped. "Under the circumstances, every hour spent waiting represents an escalating possibility of disaster."

"Oh lay off my brother, Lucy," said Sirius angrily. "He's got a right to his opinion, and I happen to agree with him."

"Which only serves to render his opinion less reliable to me," Lucius drawled. "And as I recall, the last time someone called me '*Lucy*' was in 1978. And no one ever found the body."

"Can all of you just shut up and let me concentrate," Harry said irritably. "We're doing this today just like we said we would. We need information, and this is the only lead we've got left. So I'm doing it."

"At least let us come with you, Harry," Sirius implored.

Harry simply shook his head and continued to focus his full attention on his own reflection. After a few seconds, the boy's entire body shuddered. Then, his raven-colored hair suddenly lightened to a stringy brown mop, and his brilliant green eyes turned dark grey. He concentrated even harder, and his brow furrowed from his exertions until, finally, Harry's distinctive lightning bolt scar (the one Reg and Sirius had already forgotten looked like a Sowilo rune) faded away.

Moments later, Harry, who now looked remarkably like his cousin Amaryllis Wilkes somehow transformed into a boy, entered the main office and locked the door behind him. He strolled over to the large oil painting of Erasmus Wilkes, a/k/a the Toymaker, and studied the deceased Death Eater for a moment. Summoning his Gryffindor courage and harnessing it to his Slytherin cunning, Harry reached out to touch the painting with his wand.

"*Wake up,* " he hissed in Parseltongue. As he'd predicted, it took a Parselmouth to awaken the slumbering portrait, and in response, a ripple passed over the surface of the painting.

Oddly, the first reaction was to the man's Meerschaum pipe from which bubbles started to flow. Then, Wilkes himself blinked rapidly before quickly jumping up off the fainting couch upon which he'd been reclining.

"*Who-Eee!* " he shouted with an infectious cheer. "*Merlin's Testes!* I feel like I've been stuck here for *ages!* I think my arse has gone completely numb!"

Wilkes giggled loudly in response to his own joke. But then, he noticed the young man standing in front of his painting.

"Why hello, there, young shaver me'lad! I must say that you are in *absolutely no sense* what I was expecting!" He paused and blew into his Meerschaum pipe again, causing another round of bubbles to emerge.

"So who, dare I ask, are you exactly?!"

Harry lifted his chin defiantly. When he spoke, it was in Parseltongue, and the Toymaker's eyes widened in response.

"*My name isss Hadrian Erasssmussss Wilkesss,*" Harry hissed before switching to English.

"And it's time we talked... *Father!*"

Next: Meet the Toymaker! Plus, Jim has an unexpected conversation of his own and Harry learns a new spell... much to his allies' alarm.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be

profoundly grateful if you checked out my P*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading):

Genius by the Numbers by Lomonaaren. More accurately, it's one I've read, as the story is complete with just seven chapters. It's a Harry/TMR fic which might not be everyone's cup of tea, but they're both adults and roughly the same age and Voldemort never killed Harry's parents, so it doesn't creep me out as much as most examples of that pairing. Anyway, the real reason I'm recommending it is because of its absolutely fascinating take on Arithmancy.

For Want of a Nail by RelenaDuo. On ff.n it's still in Year 2, but on AO3, it's up to Year 4. An oddly delightful crack fic. Technically, it's a WBWL fic, but the twin is a fairly minor character. The fun starts in chapter 2 when, in response to abuse by Vernon, the Scar horcrux wakes up and starts talking. And the Obscurus inside him wakes up and starts growling. Harry names the Obscurus Spot and nicknames Voldemort as "Vol." Things only get crazier from there.

AN3: One of my Discord members suggested that it might be helpful to remind readers of the chapters in which the three True Prophecies in play can be found. The complete 1780 Potter Prophecy can be found in Chapter 125 (DEM #41). Sybil Trelawney's second Prophecy can be found in Chapter 128 (Dem #44). Sybil's first Prophecy is, of course, the one from canon that should be well-known to you all.

AN4: Special thanks to my Discord editors: 100beep, BlueWater5, Bob, dragonsandotters, jake3984, kean, Krisni, LFGB, meleryngst, Molly, Mr Yarrow Dread Ellen Ink, Marq,

Norégveldi, Priest Of Judgement(Pivosh), Rubric of Ahriman, Sakkiko, and TrendyTreky./ Thanks, guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 15,823. Followers: 16,695. Favorites: 14,891. Communities: 233. Discord followers: 3962! Go Team POS!

A Series of Tense Conversations (Part 2)

Chapter 6: A Series of Tense Conversations (Part 2)

Shameless plug! My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now for sale, and I am presently working on the sequel. Also, work has begun on an audio-book for Strangers In Boston. Check out my Discord Server and/or my website for more information: <https://thesinisterman.com/home/>.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Harry Black

and the Resurrection Game

Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.

Chapter 6: A Series of Tense Conversations (pt 2)

2 August 1994

The Wizengamot Office of House Wilkes

Harry Black wore his most haughty and confident sneer as he stood before the portrait of the late Erasmus Wilkes. It was an act, of course, as he was quite nervous about this conversation. While he had been assured that there was no harmful magic attached to the portrait that could be brought

to bear against him, the Toymaker's reputation for mad genius was as legendary as it was terrifying. But his biggest fear was simply making some mistake that would allow the portrait to see through his disguise. The portrait of the former Lord Wilkes was the last option the Azkabal presently had for gathering intelligence on Voldemort's plans and, hopefully, tracking down his remaining Horcruxes. So he *really* needed to persuade the portrait that he was someone who could be trusted with the most sensitive information the Death Eater might possibly know.

And so, in preparation for this meeting, Harry had used his limited Metamorphmagery to give himself the same hair color and eye color that both Erasmus Wilkes and Amy Wilkes shared. He'd also caused his Sowilo scar to temporarily disappear, although doing so was mildly painful. More importantly, he'd used his Occlumency training to temporarily alter his own demeanor so that he would seem to be the sort of person a psychopath like Wilkes might find congenial. Thus disguised, both physically and mentally, Harry woke up the dead man's portrait as part of a bold stratagem: persuading the portrait that the real Erasmus Wilkes had been Harry's...

"*Father ?!*" Wilkes exclaimed before giggling for a few seconds. "Really? I think I would have remembered siring a child."

"Sadly," Harry replied, "you weren't around for the delivery." Then, he switched back into Parseltongue briefly.

"Though I would assssume that thisss would be enough to prove I wasss your ssson ."

"I ssssuposse it isss persssasssive evidence, " Wilkes hissed in return before returning to English. "Of course, I only

remember things that happened before I was updated, which was May of 1980, I think. Stupid of me really. Like somebody not making out a will because they think they're too young to die. So am I to assume that the stork brought you sometime after that point?"

"You died in December of 1980," Harry said flatly. "Mother was two months pregnant at the time. She gave birth to me in a DMLE holding cell on the 23rd of June, 1981. Then, she handed me off to Lord and Lady Goyle and went off to Azkaban, where she died within a year. Today is the 2nd of August, 1994."

Wilkes sighed loudly. "Such a shame," he said wistfully. "We had some good times together, Linnea and me. She wasn't as clever as me, bless her, but she had a wonderful *mean streak* in her once I taught her how to let it out."

Then, Wilkes turned his full attention back to Harry. "And since my orphaned child is here to wake me up instead of... oh, a senior Death Eater or something, can I assume something unfortunate happened to the Dark Lord and his delightfully violent agenda?"

Harry nodded with a rueful expression. "The details are murky, but on the 31st of October, 1981, the Dark Lord set out personally to murder the family of James Potter. But something went wrong when he tried to use the Killing Curse against their infant son, Jim Potter, and the magical backlash destroyed his body."

Wilkes blinked. "Well... *that* was clumsy of him." Then, he shook his head and studied Harry more closely. "Hang on a minute! Lord and Lady Goyle?! Any child of mine should have gone to the Malfoys!"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know what happened there, but the Malfoys fobbed me off onto House Goyle. They were... adequate guardians, I suppose."

Wilkes shook his head. "Blimey! The *Goyles* ! I'm amazed that you even learned to read! And it's been thirteen years since T... since *our Lord* fell?"

The man's eyes flashed angrily. "Okay, first things first. Who killed me? And was I avenged? Or was I just an idiot and blew myself up while futzing around in my lab?"

Harry sniffed disdainfully. "It was a blood traitor named Weasley-one of Dumbledore's minions-who tracked a bunch of dead Muggles back to you, but it was Alastor Moody who struck the killing blow during an Auror raid. Wilkes Manor was burned to the ground in the process."

Then, the boy's lips rose into a cruel smile. "As I understand it, the Dark Lord paid him a personal visit in response. You will be pleased to know that he tortured and murdered everyone Moody ever cared about in front of him and then took a leg and one of his eyes for good measure. Moody's a broken shell of a man, though killing him is certainly on my long-term to-do list."

"I'm glad to hear it... Hadrian, was it? Seriously? Hadrian? However did you get stuck with such a ridiculous name?"

"No idea. I'd assumed that Mother named me before passing me over, but I've never known for sure. To be honest, I usually go by Harry at school. Stupid people find that more... *likeable* . Is it important in terms of inheritance or for some other reason?"

"No, no. Our charter has no naming requirements. You have Wilkes blood in you. That's all that matters." He looked the

boy up and down. "And Harry's a good fit for you. Harry Wilkes! That's good! An *action* name! So, how old are you, Harry?"

"Thirteen," Harry lied.

"Heh. Big for your age, aren't you?"

The boy snorted. "Call it the benefits of clean living."

Wilkes giggled again. Then, he shook his head and began pacing within the confines of the frame. At one point, he looked at the side of the frame quizzically and rapped it with his knuckles.

"I appear to be trapped in this frame," he noted. "I suppose my frame that was hanging in the attic at Funtime House went with the rest of the building."

"... Funtime House?" Harry inquired.

"Yes, yes," Wilkes grumbled. "*Officially*, it was Wilkes Manor, but that was *so booooring!*"

"Of course it was. Funtime House it is then. And yes, I've been told it made an impressive bonfire. Do you have another frame hidden anywhere?"

"One," Wilkes said absentmindedly. "But that doesn't help. The magic that keeps me trapped here is on the painting itself. Heh! The cowardly kittens were so frightened of the Big Bad Toymaker that they didn't even want me moving into other frames here in the Ministry of Magic. Pitiful!"

Then, he gave a sour expression as he looked past Harry at the rest of the office. "And the perfidious bastards have

cleaned out my office too!" he spat. "My yo-yo! My rubber ducky collection! Even my pickled baby's breath!"

Harry blinked a few times. "Baby's... breath? Are we talking about the flower?"

The Death Eater snorted. "No, of course not! I had a bottle in which I'd collected the dying breaths of various babies I'd killed over the years! I was saving them for a project I was working on! And now, *who knows* what happened to them!"

Harry took a moment to fortify his Occlumency so that he could stay in character. It was difficult. "Out of morbid curiosity, just how many... babies did you kill? You know, for their dying breaths."

Wilkes waved his hand distractedly. "Honestly, only about four, I think," he said in what sounded like petulant disappointment. "It would have been five, but one time, I couldn't get the cork out of the bottle fast enough. Damned nuisance!"

"Four, almost five?"

"Yes, but that's only the babies," the Toymaker said while raising his chin imperiously. "My *total* death count is much, much higher. How about you? Are you living up to your old man's expectations? How many kills do *you* have so far? Total, that is. No need to break it up by ages or anything."

Harry did his best to look bashful instead of appalled. "Only one so far. But it was one of Dumbledore's people, if that helps. And I killed him with a spell I boosted with Parselmagic! He splattered all over the wall like... I don't know, a big bucket of tomato soup, I suppose. At the time, I thought it was rather impressive."

The boy did his best impression of a son trying to please his father while trying not to think about how gruesome Remus Lupin's death was nor about the fact that it was retroactively undone. Wilkes's face split into a broad grin.

"You're doing Parselmagic already? And I bet you don't even have a teacher! Good show, Harry! Please tell me you're taking Ancient Runes. There is *so much* you can do with Parselmagic when you're doing high level enchanting."

Harry's face lit up. "Like that snake-in-a-box that makes people laugh themselves to death?"

"You've heard about that!"

"Yeah, it's, um, been in the news lately." The boy looked thoughtful. "By any chance do you know a Death Eater named Peter Pettigrew?"

"Pettigrew? Oh yes, Mr. Nemo's protégé he keeps bragging about. I've met him a few times, but he hasn't taken the Mark yet. Or at least, not by the time I was last updated. Why?"

"Well, at some point, you gave him one of those boxes. Just a few months ago, he was exposed as having been a secret Death Eater all this time, and he left it behind for the hit wizards to find. Five of them are still in St. Mungo's giggling like fools."

Wilkes gave his strange giggle again. "Well, good for Mr. Pettigrew! I'm glad I was able to help him bring smiles to so many faces!"

"And you made it with Parselmagic?"

"Oh yes! It's easy once you know how! Honestly, it's just a common Rictumsempra augmented with Parseltongue and then inscribed on a children's toy!"

"That's it? No one from St. Mungo's has any idea how to cure it!"

Wilkes tapped his nose conspiratorially. "Think about it, Harry. That curse could be undone by a simple Finite Incantatem uttered in Parseltongue. But how many Parselmouths does St. Mungo's keep on staff? And if there are any at all, how many of them are willing to *expose themselves* as Parselmouths just to cure some poxied hit wizards of the delight my little toy has brought to them? After all, my father taught me by the age of three that I needed to conceal my status as a Speaker, and that was before our Lord made Parseltongue into a weapon of mass destruction!"

Then, he suddenly looked alarmed. "Please tell me no one knows that *you* are a Parselmouth!"

Harry shook his head. "No, I've been careful. But... you mentioned the Dark Lord again, and I guess that takes us to the real reason I worked so hard to get here and meet with you." He took a deep breath. "I wanted to ask if you know of any way to restore Lord Voldemort to life."

Wilkes took a step back within the painting and suddenly grew quite serious. "And why do you think that reviving him is even possible?"

"Because two years ago, someone smuggled a cursed diary into Hogwarts belonging to a former student named Tom Marvolo Riddle. Do you know anything about *him*?"

Wilkes grinned again. "Know him? Oh, sonny boy, there are *all kinds* of interesting things I know about Tom Marvolo Riddle. But alas, none I can share with you. So Tom's diary was brought to Hogwarts? What happened next?"

"Well, as I understand it, the diary somehow contained a part of Voldemort's soul. It possessed a student and used him to unleash Slytherin's Monster-a basilisk, by the way, if you didn't know-on the school. And the whole time, the diary was draining the life force from the student it was possessing in order to generate a spectral version of Lord Voldemort that came close to coming fully back to life."

"But obviously not quite all the way." A strange intensity came into Wilkes's eyes. "What happened? What went wrong?"

Harry snorted contemptuously. "Jim Potter! He stuck his big Gryffindor nose where it wasn't wanted. As incredible as it seems, he killed Slytherin's Monster with a magic sword. And *then*, he used that same sword to stab the diary itself, which destroyed it and, apparently, the soul fragment."

For a second, a look of terrible frightening rage passed over his face, but then, it faded, and he seemed as affable as ever.

"Yeah, I reckon basilisk venom would do it," he muttered to himself, though Harry still heard. "And you haven't killed this little shit yet?"

Harry shrugged. "He's rather hard to get to and surprisingly good at staying alive. It helps, I suppose, that he spends a lot of time hiding behind old Dumb-as-a-door's skirts."

"Ha!" Wilkes barked out. "Dumb-as-a-door! I love that! And anyway, I suppose it's for the best. I imagine T..." He caught

himself and grew frustrated for a second at nearly misspeaking. "I imagine *Lord Voldemort* will want to kill the brat personally. He might take offense if anyone does it for him."

"I'll remember that. But what I need to know now is-Did our Lord leave *any other* items that could be used to resurrect him that I can get to and use?"

Wilkes suddenly grew very serious and stared at Harry appraisingly for a while.

"Harry, are you *sure* that you're committed to our Lord's return? No matter *what* the cost?"

Harry nodded somberly. "The blood traitors and Mudbloods took everything from us, Father. I am committed."

The Toymaker's face broke back out into a broad grin. "Then step closer and listen carefully, my son. Because I've got a few things to share with you."

Five minutes later, Harry stepped back out into the antechamber with a pensive expression on his face.

"Well?" Regulus asked. "How did it go?"

Harry looked up at him. "I've got good news and bad news. The good news is that I know where the fourth Horcrux, the Gaunt Lord's ring, is hidden, as well as some idea of what the protections around it are."

"And the bad news?" Lucius asked in a tone indicating he was expecting the worst.

"The bad news is that *I can't tell either of you* about it. Nor anyone else! *Because I'm not the Secret Keeper!* "

3 August 1994

"Potter Manor"

11:00 a.m.

The day after Harry's swearing-in (and his brief but informative encounter with Erasmus Wilkes), his study group resumed for one last week prior to the start of the Quidditch World Cup. Feelings about the Cup were mixed, largely but not entirely along gender lines. Ginny Weasley joined most of the boys in being beyond excited about the event, while Anthony Goldstein joined most of the girls in being largely uninterested. But there was one aspect of the Cup that held everyone's attention-Harry's scheme to make money off of it.

All summer long, Harry's "brain trust," as Sue Li liked to call it, had put a lot of effort into perfecting their Eye-Spy magitech, and they had successfully made a half-dozen prototypes. George Weasley in particular had been a boon to their activities with his nearly savant-like skill at rune-working. And when he wasn't working on the magical side of things, Harry was also coordinating the business side with his financial partners: Lucius Malfoy, Malcolm Finch-Fletchley, and Sirius Black, all three of whom had agreed to invest financially in the Eye-Spy project along with House Wilkes. Unbeknownst to them, however, there was a secret outside investor. Harry decided not to share with his other partners that a front company for the Unspeakables had a 12% stake in what was tentatively called Eye-Spy Productions.

The specific contribution of those various partners, aside from providing raw materials to make the flying cameras in the first place (and in the case of the DoM, not shutting them down and Obliviating everyone involved), was to pay for the Eye-Spy's first field test. They had arranged to have the four national teams of the British Isles appear on August 6 at a pair of exhibition games to be held at the Hogwarts Quidditch Field. The exhibition games-England vs. Wales and Scotland vs. Ireland-would be free to all current Hogwarts students and staff, but anyone else could come buy a ticket with a small donation to the Hogwarts General Fund.

More importantly, however, during each match, the stadium would be ringed with Eye-Spies, seven in all. One each to track the Quaffle and the two Bludgers at all times, one to watch each of the Seekers, and one trained on each of the Keepers. After the match's conclusion, the information crystals of all seven Eye-Spies would then be edited into one master recording, complete with audio commentary to be provided by Ludo Bagman and Gwenog Jones, who had both been hired by Lucius for that purpose. And *then*, the brain trust could turn to how best to market their recording to the general public.

The most promising medium so far was enchanted mirrors. They were a well-established medium for various audio-visual magical effects. More importantly, one of the many businesses owned by the Finch-Fletchleys was a small mirror factory in Birmingham, which allowed the group as many mirrors as they needed for experimental purposes at no cost.

In fact, Hermione was holding one such mirror at this very moment, while Anthony maneuvered an Eye-Spy around the room with his wand. The orb was bulky, about two feet in diameter, but it was still able to levitate itself with ease

when directed to do so. When it had reached a position about five feet away from George Weasley, Anthony gave a command and then lowered his wand. The Eye-Spy hung in the air. George waved cheekily at the orb and then moved around the room, slowly at first but then faster and more erratically, singing the Hogwarts School Song as he went. The Eye-Spy tracked his movements easily.

"Okay, tracking seems to work," Anthony said. "Let's check the audio and video quality, and then we can take it outside and make sure it can react fast enough to track someone on a broom."

With a word and a flick of his wand, the orb floated over to a nearby table and landed, at which point Sue Li came over and removed a small crystal rod. She handed the rod over to Hermione, who popped it into a small depression at the bottom of the mirror she was holding. The mirror had been specially made by Sir Malcolm's factory to the group's specifications, and upon arrival, George painstakingly etched the proper runes into the frame. Once the crystal rod was in place, Hermione touched one of those runes with her wand. Instantly, her reflection disappeared to be replaced by an image of George waving. Everyone crowded around her excitedly to watch the playback.

"I wonder if this was what Thomas Edison felt like when he saw the first film recording played back," Anthony mused.

"Pfft!" Sue scoffed. "You *would* make this all about Edison!"

"Oh, don't you start!" Goldstein snapped ruefully. "Edison's greater historical importance compared to Nikola Tesla is unquestioned."

"Hush, both of you!" Hermione interrupted. "You always get into a shouting match over the Edison/Tesla rivalry and end

up wasting hours on it."

Harry and George just looked at one another.

"I have no context for this, do you?" Harry inquired. George shrugged in response.

Then, Harry suddenly looked alarmed. "By the way, where is Fred?! He's not off somewhere about to blow up my new home, is he?"

"Nah!" Beat. "Well, *probably* not. He's giving Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Amy pointers on '*proper slicing and crushing*' techniques after he saw poor Longbottom nearly melt a cauldron and barely vanished the contents in time."

"That's... uncharacteristically noble of him," Harry said cautiously.

"Well, he's started taking potion-work more seriously in general," George said before adding, "Also, it gets him and Ginny both out of helping Mum in the kitchen. She's been going spare with all the stuff she's cooking for hoity-toity folks who will be showing off at the Cup. I think the Muggles call it '*tail-gating*,' which sounds a bit rude but probably means something different than I was originally thinking."

While Harry and George chatted, Hermione was unable to break-up Anthony and Sue's longstanding disagreement over the relative merits of American-based inventors Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla. Then, Anthony suddenly smiled mischievously.

"Say, Harry? Are you still trying to come up with a new name for Potter Manor?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"How about *Menlo Park*?"

"DON'T YOU DARE!" Sue exclaimed. "Besides, Menlo Park wasn't Edison's *home*. It was the town where he set up his business!" She turned to Harry herself.

"If you want to rename this place, you should call it *Wardenclyffe Tower*!"

"Oh, *that's* auspicious!" Anthony said sarcastically. "That project *failed*! And the Tower got torn down and sold for scrap! Besides, this house *doesn't have* a tower!"

"ENOUGH!" Harry yelled. "Okay, here's what we're going to do. We're going to set this whatever-this-is aside for later so we can go out and test the Eye-Spies in the air. Then, your *homework* will be to come back tomorrow with a written report explaining in twenty-five words or less what the new name of Potter Manor should be and why."

"Oh, can I play too?" said Ginny as she entered the room along with Fred's other Potions students. To Harry's relief, it turned out that they'd also been under the supervision of Penelope, Titus, and Bobby.

"Fine, fine. We'll make it a contest! Whoever comes up with the best name gets a gift certificate to Honeydukes or something."

"Sounds fun," Neville said. "Only we won't be here tomorrow. We'll all be meeting at Longbottom Manor because you wanted to use the pool."

"Oh yes, the submersible broom!" Hermione exclaimed. "How are you coming with that?"

Harry shrugged. "I think I have the rune sequence worked out, but it hasn't been a priority. I mean, how likely am I to need a broom I can fly underwater anytime soon? We'll see how good my runework is if I start to drown, and Neville has to dive in and save me."

Everyone chuckled, but then Amy spoke up.

"Say, where's Sirius? I haven't seen him all day."

Harry grimaced. "He's with... Archie. Today's the day Sirius is going to open up his own family manor house."

With that, everyone headed outside for the flying experiments, but Harry caught Hermione's eye and got her to stay behind.

"Before I forget, would you mind terribly if I asked you to do a bit of outside research for me? Specifically, research in a Muggle library because we're at a dead end magically?"

"I suppose so. I can pop by my local library this weekend. What's the topic?"

Harry looked around to make sure no one was around to hear. "Anything you can find out about a little town somewhere either in Yorkshire or Lancashire called *Little Hangleton* . And

also, anything about residents there, past or present, named either Gaunt... or *Riddle* ."

From an owl post sent that same day...

Lupin

I've been waiting to hear back from you for weeks. The Headmaster informs me that you will not be returning as Caretaker, an understandable decision. But that is no reason to break off all contact. You were the one who proposed using Animagery as a possible cure for Lycanthropy. If I'm to evaluate your suggestion, I need those notes you promised me.

Snape

Dartmoor National Park

4:00 p.m.

It had taken the group most of the day to reach their destination. They'd started early that morning, but the drive from London to Princetown took nearly four hours in Ted Tonks's rental car, followed by a five-hour hike through the soggy marshlands of Dartmoor. A good amount of that time had been spent with the Black Brothers and their cousin Andromeda regaling Ted and Nymphadora Tonks with stories about their childhood visits to Chevenoir, the ancestral home of the Ancient and Noble House of Black.

Centuries before, it had been the Castle Black, whose foundations had been laid in the Sixth Century in the aftermath of the Ancient Families' victory over the Druids. Castle Black stood proudly for eight centuries. But then, alas, in 1471, Lord Sagittarius Black picked the wrong side in the conflict between the Muggle Houses of York and Lancaster and paid for it with his lands and his head. Castle Black was leveled to its foundations by York-aligned wizards on the order of King Richard III.

But the House of Black survived through Sagittarius's son and Heir, Perseus Black. Percy the Black avenged his father

while serving as a battle-mage to Henry Tudor, who rewarded his wizarding ally greatly upon his coronation as King Henry VII. Construction of a new seat for House Black began in 1486, a year to the day after Richard's death at Bosworth Field. But instead of a castle, Perseus chose a different course. The new Lord Black fancied himself an artist and scholar as well as a warrior, and on the foundations of Castle Black, he raised a massive, three-story mansion in a new architectural style of his own design. The King was a great admirer of this new style, and Muggle architects would soon mimic Perseus's innovations, leading to what Muggle historians now refer to as "the Tudor style" but which was commonly known as "the Perseiad style" until the advent of the Statute of Secrecy. The most iconic feature of the mansion was its heavy use of British oak timbers which had been magically darkened to the color of ebony. Perseus christened his new family manse as Chenenoir or "Black Oak."

Or at least he would have had an inattentive scribe not misspelled it as "Chevenoir" in all the official documents filed with the Wizengamot.

As the quintet continued their slog through the fens of Dartmoor, Ted Tonks led the way, as his long-ago Boy Scout training allowed him to follow the map to their destination. Nymphadora followed along beside him. Having grown bored with tales of ancient Black history, the youngest Black present had taken to grumbling about their long trek.

"I still don't see why we have to *walk* !" she exclaimed in exhaustion.

"Because it's the only way, dear," said Andromeda from the rear. She and Regulus were following Sirius who walked in the middle while leaning heavily on a staff.

"The Floo is blocked off from the inside," Regulus added. "And the place is Unplottable, so no one can Apparate or Portkey in. We wouldn't even be able to find the place if scouting from above on brooms, even ignoring the risk of being seen by Muggles. We must first travel to Chevenoir the hard way. Only then can we be keyed into the wards by the master of the house."

"Which, barring disaster, will be *me* in a little while," said Sirius merrily, though his good cheer disguised his obvious exhaustion from the long hike. "And once I've claimed the place, I can open up the Floo again, and you can be home in time for supper!"

He stopped suddenly and then, with a cry, pointed to a large standing stone in the distance. "Ah! There it is! Beardown Man! And just beyond it, the Devil's Tor!"

Then, with a loud "*Woohoo*," he dropped his staff, shifted into his dog form, and bounded off towards the standing stone.

"Dammit, Sirius!" Reg exclaimed while pausing to retrieve his impetuous brother's walking staff. "Wait for us!"

Dora just shook her head. "Great. A big, tall rock. And a bunch of smaller rocks. Totally worth spending my day off on this."

"Well," said Andromeda, "at least there are no Muggles about to see a Grim bounding across the moors of South Devon! It would cause a panic down in the local village!"

Seconds later, the quintet regrouped around Beardown Man, a ten-foot-tall slab of granite which, according to Sirius, had been placed there over 4,000 years before by the ancient Druids for some inscrutable purpose. Muggles referred to

such stones as menhirs, liths, or simply standing stones, and the word "Man" referred not to a human but to the Celtic word for "stone." Not far from Beardown Man was an oddly shaped rocky outcropping that had been known as Devil's Tor for centuries, but for reasons that were now obscure. Certainly, Nymphadora did not think it looked particularly menacing or ominous as she jogged towards it in pursuit of the shaggy Grim.

"Okay," she said, while breathing hard. "What now?"

Sirius grinned. "What now? Now, you and Ted get to be amazed by Chevenoir in all its glory!"

With that, he touched the gem on his Lord's Ring to the surface of Beardown Man and spoke.

"I, Sirius Orion Black, Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, do claim that which was promised. By my blood and the blood of Arcturus Black and the blood of all the Lords Black who have come before, I do claim full rights to Chevenoir! *Toujours Pur!* "

Instantly, a shiver passed through Sirius's body as he bonded with the wards of Chevenoir, and the *four* ley lines which fed them. From nearby, there was a... not a sound, but something that felt like sound. Like the *idea* of a gigantic rusted door slowly swinging open even though there was no door to see. The four Blacks plus one turned in the direction of the sensation, and about 100 yards away, there was a great shimmer as centuries of protective wards opened up and allowed them to witness what lay hidden within.

All five of them simply stared in shock until Nymphadora spoke at last.

"Yeah," she muttered sarcastically, "I'm completely amazed at *the glory* of Chevenoir."

Visible before them was the space where Chevenoir *had once stood*, now with naught but fragments of its foundation still in place to hint at its former size and grandeur. The black stone chimney that once rose more than three stories tall was now stood barely two, but what remained was plainly visible, for there were no walls left to obscure its view. Shattered stone and burnt timber lay all around the remaining foundations, which had for the most part collapsed into the mansion's cellar.

"No... impossible," Regulus gasped. "Chevenoir... *gone* ?!"

Andromeda sobbed and put her hands over her mouth as Ted came up behind her to put an arm around her. Sirius just shook his head and then snarled.

"No, no! It's a trick of some kind! An illusion!"

With that, he took off towards the ruins in a run, dropping down onto all fours and shifting into Padfoot again in mid-stride.

"Dammit, Sirius! Come back!" With a curse, Regulus tore off after his brother with the others following after. Nymphadora was in the rear, but as she drew near the wreckage, she stopped as something else drew her attention: a small mound of rocks about 100 feet away from the ruins that seemed to be manmade. After sparing a glance at her parents and cousins, she headed in that direction instead.

At the edge of the ruins, Padfoot stopped and changed back to Sirius who dropped to his knees.

"What could have happened here?" he asked in a daze. "This place was built to last for centuries! To withstand *wars* ! Who could have done this?!"

Regulus came up beside him and cast several investigatory spells he'd learned as an Auror.

"This fire burned itself out... roughly three years ago. I can't tell more precisely than that but... Sirius, I think Chevenoir must have burned down sometime around Grandfather's death!"

Sirius looked up at him in shock. "Do you think there's a connection? For that matter, do we even know for sure how he died?" He rose unsteadily to his feet. "Could Grandfather have died in the fire?!"

"Easy, Sirius," Andromeda said. "Let's not jump to conclusions."

Meanwhile, Nymphadora had reached the small pile of stones and cast a few spells of her own on it. Then, she called Ted over.

"What is it, Dora?" he asked with concern. "What have you found?"

"A grave, it looks like. There's one body buried under these rocks. Human, male, and under preservation Charms, I think. There are also two much smaller and fresher graves beside it. From the size, I'd hope they were house elves, because the alternative would be infants or small children. Do you know any more specialized Charms to use on dead and interred bodies?"

Ted nodded and began to cast even as the other three moved to join them.

"What have you found?" Andromeda asked cautiously.

"One male, wizard, deceased. Around ninety-years-old at the time of death, which was about three years ago. Significant lung damage, though that wasn't the cause of death."

"Arcturus would have been about that age when he was reported dead," said Regulus woodenly. "And he had long term lung damage due to a curse he took during the Grindelwald War."

"What was the cause of death, Ted?" Sirius asked in a shaky voice.

"I can't tell precisely without disinterring the body and doing a full examination in a medical facility," the Healer replied. "But I can say this. The body is under preservation Charms, and there is very little tissue degradation. It is also fully intact with no signs of physical trauma or burns. If this is Arcturus Black, well, I don't know if he died before or after the house was destroyed, but he definitely wasn't inside at the time."

Suddenly, all five of them whirled around with wands drawn at the sound of a soft pop behind them. It was an emaciated house elf in ragged clothes.

"*You... you... came,*" the creature gasped before falling over. Instantly, the wizards and witches rushed over.

"I recognize her!" Regulus said in amazement. "It's Ophelia! She cooked for Grandfather! Merlin, she was old when I last saw her, and that was in *1978*!"

As Regulus talked, Andi reached into a bag she'd brought and pulled out several potions which she gently fed to the

barely conscious elf. Meanwhile, Ted cast several diagnostic Charms.

"This elf is indeed showing signs of advanced age. But also signs of malnutrition. Can she really have been living out here all alone since the house burned down?"

"Possibly," Regulus said. "Even without the house, the ward scheme remained intact. Besides, this area is a confluence of four ley lines. I assume a house elf could survive even without a master or a home with that much ambient magic."

Meanwhile, Sirius moved closer to the stricken house elf.

"Wake up, Ophelia," he said gently. When the elf did not respond, he closed his eyes and slumped his shoulders before he took a deep breath and spoke more firmly.

"Ophelia! I, Sirius Black, Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, do hereby *order you* to awaken!"

Instantly, Ophelia's eyes shot open and she gasped painfully. Andromeda shot Sirius an angry look, but he ignored it.

"*M-master Sirius,* " the elf croaked. "*You came. You came at last.* "

"Yes, Ophelia. I'm here. Now please-tell us what happened here? How did Chevenoir come to be destroyed?"

The house elf blinked its eyes and sobbed piteously. "*Oh, Master Sirius, please forgive us! We... we was ordered !*"

Everyone looked around to one another in shock at Ophelia's confession.

"Ophelia," Sirius continued. "Do you mean that Grandfather ordered you to burn down the house?"

She shook her head no. *"Ophelia means... that Master Arcturus ordered Catesby to destroy... the Book !"*

The Tonkses were all confused by that comment, but Sirius and Regulus gave one another anxious looks. There was only one *"Book"* to which Ophelia could be referring,

"Ophelia, tell us everything. Start with how Grandfather died."

The house elf nodded and began her tale in a weak and trembling voice punctuated by occasional wracking coughs.

"Twas in June of 1979. Master Arcturus had suffered his ailments for many, many years. But one night, he became gravely ill, wracked by palsy and stammering. The spell passed, but Master Arcturus could no longer move his arms nor legs, and he could hardly speak."

"A stroke, most likely," said Andromeda softly. "It had always been a risk with his condition."

"Why didn't anyone call a Healer?" Ted wondered aloud, but Ophelia answered.

"M-master Arcturus had given us elveses the- cough, cough- strictest orders should he b-become in-in-incapacitated. Lock down the House of Black Oaks tight so none could get through save for his Heir. We s-sent owl messages to young Master Sirius. But... he never came."

Sirius paled, and the others looked at him expectantly.

"I... I remember getting messages back then summoning me to Chevenoir. But... they never said *why*. They certainly never said that Grandfather was gravely ill!"

"We- cough, cough-was ordered not to reveal such in writing nor to leave the House of Black Oaks. But still we sent messages. And waited."

Sirius shook his head, aghast. "Mother and Father had already disowned me by then," he explained guiltily. "Cast me out and struck me from the Tapestry. I just assumed Arcturus wanted to finish the job. Or worse, turn me over to the Death Eaters to curry favor with You-Know-Who."

"He would have never done that, Sirius," Regulus said. "Grandfather never had any use for the Dark Lord. That's why he never removed you as his Heir. He prepared me to take over in your place if you died fighting Death Eaters, but... you were always his preferred Heir."

"I... I didn't know," Sirius said weakly while blinking back tears. But then, Ophelia turned her tearful eyes towards Regulus.

"We elveses tried to find you too, Master Regulus," she wheezed. "But you was hidden from us. The owls returned with their letters unopened. "

Reg swallowed deeply. "The spell Grandfather gave me to let me fake my own death. It also incorporated an anti-owl ward. The inability of an owl to find someone is often considered evidence of death."

"But Master Arcturus, he n-never gave up hoping. N-not even after s-stupid newspapers said Master Sirius had gone bad and was sent to the evil place. He gave us elveses one order to r-rule over all other- cough-all other orders. To keep

him alive as long as possible. No Healers, no pain relievers to weaken- cough-weaken his resolve or hasten his end. Keep him alive until- cough-until one of you returned. "

Sirius's lips quivered. "How... how long, Ophelia?"

A tear rolled down Ophelia's cheek. "*Twelve years. Every day of it suffering in pain. "*

"Merlin, why?!" Ted exclaimed.

"Because of my Father," Andromeda said coldly. "If Arcturus had died while Regulus was presumed dead and Sirius convicted of treason, Cygnus could have petitioned the Wizengamot to have him declared the only viable Heir and immediately claimed the Black Lordship. And then, he'd have probably turned all of House Black's resources straightaway over to *Narcissa* !"

She sneered at the memory of the man who'd expelled her from the family and the cruel sister who'd taken such delight in it. "But as it happened, Cygnus only survived Arcturus by just a few months, most of which was spent in the grip of senile dementia."

"Yes," Ophelia said softly while shutting her eyes in pain. "*Young Toki did his work well, even though it cost him his life. "*

The wizards and witches looked at one another in confusion.

"If I remember correctly," Regulus said slowly, "Toki was Grandfather's youngest house elf. Ophelia, what do you mean by that?"

The frail elf took several deep breaths, as if preparing herself for the end.

"Forgive us our sins, Master Regulus, Master Sirius. We... we was ordered. In December of '91, just- cough-days before Christmas, Lord Arcturus Black finally passed from this Material World. Not all Ophelia's and Catesby's and Reba's and Toki's magic could preserve the Master's life for- cough, cough-for one more second. And so, we did magic to his body to preserve it and then buried it in the garden that once grew here. And from that garden, young Toki plucked three berries from the Deliriosos Lacrimae bush that- cough-that Lady Hester Gamp Black had planted there some hundred years a'fore. Then, young Toki- cough, cough-entered the home of Cygnus and Druella Black by stealth and squeezed the berries so that the juice dripped down onto Cygnus Black's lips while he slept. "

"Merlin's bones!" Andromeda whispered in a horrified voice. The others turned towards her and she explained.

"Deliriosos Lacrimae or '*Tears of Madness*' is a dangerous plant that is illegal to own privately. The juice from a single berry can cause irreversible insanity. And the juice of three berries would have been a lethal dose."

She looked away, her eyes blinking madly. "It appears I was wrong. My father did not suffer from senile dementia. He was *poisoned* on the orders of *the Lord of his own House* with a substance that drove him to screaming insanity before killing him painfully."

Despite herself, she chuckled and gave Ted a grim smile. "And now, dearest, you know where that part of me comes from."

"Waitamminute!" Nymphadora exclaimed. "Do you mean to say that house elves can be used as *assassins* ?!"

Ophelia had a sudden severe coughing fit before she was finally able to answer. "*Not easily, young Miss. We house elves are not meant for such things. It is against...*" She paused and then began again. "*Young Toki returned to report that his task was complete. Then, he ended himself. We buried him in the garden next to the Master.*"

"And then, you destroyed Chevenoir," Sirius said. "On Grandfather's orders?"

Ophelia shook her head. "*We did not destroy our home by choice. But Catesby's- cough-final task was to destroy... the Book. The Final Option.*"

Regulus and Sirius looked at one another again in understanding. *The Final Option* was the name of a ritual contained in every copy of the *Anathema Codex*. Not truly a spell, it was rather a sequence of seemingly random words that, if spoken aloud by one holding the book, could instantly destroy it. As the name implied, it was a last-ditch defense used to prevent a copy of the Codex from falling into the hands of someone unworthy. The Final Option's destructive capacity varied according to the desire of the one who triggered it. It could incinerate just the Codex or everything within a half-mile radius or anything in between. But regardless, it would *always* kill the one who cast it. In this instance, Catesby, Arcturus's most trusted house elf, acted on his master's last orders and used the Final Option to destroy the Black copy of the Anathema Codex along with himself. Whether he *planned* to destroy Chevenoir and all the Dark objects and grimoires within it to keep them out of the wrong hands or it was simply a mishap caused by a house elf triggering the Final Option rather than a wizard could never be known.

"What happened then, Ophelia?" Regulus asked gently. The house elf took a few seconds to catch her breath.

"The great house of your ancestors was no more, Mr. Regulus. Catesby was destroyed along with it. Tweren't nothing left even to bury. Reba and Ophelia survived here alone, with no one to serve, no one to give us orders. But even with Chevenoir gone, there was still wards and magic and the ley lines what fed them. That was enough for a time. Reba went just three months after Chevenoir burned. Of a broken heart more than anything else. Ophelia buried Reba's remains next to Toki and the old Master. Then, Ophelia waited and waited, hoping that someone from the House of Black would come so that Ophelia could tell her story."

The tiny creature looked up at Sirius. *"Has Ophelia been a good elf, Master Sirius?"*

"Yes, Ophelia," Lord Black answered gravely. "You've been a very good elf. All of you have. Grandfather would have been very proud of you all."

She smiled. *"Then, Master Sirius, can Ophelia rest now?"*

"Of course! Andromeda, give her something to help her sleep until we can get her home."

Ophelia shook her head.

"No, Master Sirius. Ophelia is not needing sleep. Chevenoir is gone. Ophelia's old Master is gone. Ophelia's kin are gone. Ophelia wants to rest now. The only rest a house elf can ever have. Please, Master Sirius. Can Ophelia rest?"

Sirius swallowed painfully, and his voice shook when he finally spoke.

"Y-yes, Ophelia. I order you to rest."

She smiled and closed her eyes... and breathed no more.

At Sirius's direction, the group held a moment of silence for Arcturus Black and the last of his faithful house elves. They buried Ophelia next to Reba and Toki, and then Sirius transfigured the earthen burial plots into small stone markers that bore their names. But he did not reshape Arcturus's own grave. Instead, he used magic to move the stones aside and expose the old man's perfectly preserved body. He looked more peaceful in death than any of the Blacks who knew him ever remembered him being when he was alive.

While Ted and Nymphadora watched, Sirius, Regulus, and Andromeda raised their wands as one, and Sirius began to speak the words that his Grandfather had taught him as a child.

"I, Sirius Orion Black, Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Black, hereby testify before Magic itself. Be it known that Arcturus Rigel Black the Third died a true Son of the House of Black. That he conducted himself to the last moment of his life with dignity and courage and with the highest values of wizardry. That he..." Sirius faltered for a moment but then continued.

"That he stood in his place along the Watchtower until the very end. And that whatever his sins, his soul and heart were always pure. We Blacks are named for stars and planets and heavenly bodies because it is from star stuff that we are born. And it is to the stars that we commend Arcturus Black: our kinsman, our Lord, our blood."

For years after, the younger Muggles of Princetown, Devonshire would talk excitedly about the strange lights in the skies they had all seen on the night of 2 August 1994. Was it aliens or secret government testing? But the older Muggles just shook their heads and went back to their business. Strange lights in the sky above the Devil's Tor wasn't anything special to be concerned about.

It was Dartmoor after all.

4 Privet Drive, Surrey

10:00 p.m.

As the elder Potters were getting ready for bed, their son Jim was engaged in some late-night studying in the privacy of his room. The current topic of research was a forbidden if not illegal book entitled *Animagery: The Deeper Mysteries*, and Jim only read it at night for fear his parents would discover it and hit the roof. Presently, the boy sat at the cheap writing desk in his room, wearing pajama bottoms and his new favorite T-shirt. Lily had taken him to a Muggle shopping mall the day before to buy him some new Muggle clothes so he could go out in the neighborhood inconspicuously. He'd been moody and untalkative for days ever since their conversation about the Triwizard Tournament, and to Lily's mild concern, he had mostly chosen all-black clothing.

In particular, Jim insisted on buying one special T-shirt he saw hanging in a shop window, the same shirt he was wearing now. It was mostly black, but on the front was a picture of a black raven perched on a tree branch against a background of purples and grays. Along the side was a single word in jagged, blocky letters written in a bloody red that popped against the black shirt: "NEVERMORE." The

shirt had mesmerized Jim when he saw it, and he asked Lily what it meant, which led to a brief explanation of American Muggle writer Edgar Allan Poe and then, to her surprise, a side-trip to a Muggle bookstore for a paperback edition of Poe's works.

That evening, Jim had skimmed through the entire book, most of which he found dreary and quite sinister, but Poe's poem *The Raven* stuck with him, and he read through it several times before finally deciding that he'd put off the inevitable long enough. He picked up the Animagery book again and turned back to the passage he'd found so confusing the night before.

While many would-be Animagi struggle for years to fully master the transformation, it is my belief that their difficulties lie not in any deficiency in themselves nor any hidden complexity in the process of attuning to the proper morphic resonance. Rather, what holds back most wizards and witches who falter in their journey is fear. Not fear of discovery by those who would persecute Animagi. Not even fear of a transformation gone wrong that results in permanent injury, death, or perhaps worst of all, irreversible entrapment in one's animal form. No, the greatest fear transcends those banal concerns. It is the fear of embracing magic's true potential. It is the fear of what small-minded fools dare not contemplate in all its terrible majesty, and so they brand with that insipid placeholder name: The Wild.

The true Animagus does not simply "turn into an animal." Rather, he subsumes into himself the totality of what his animal is, what it symbolizes, what it truly means. The first humans worshiped the spirits of the animals around them as gods, as the totemic rulers of the higher realms. Later, Muggles rebelled against a spiritual hierarchy that required them to acknowledge the superiority of the totem animals,

the ineffable distillation of what every breed of Earthly animal represents in mortal minds. And so, those Muggles invented new gods. Gods made in their own image with human forms and human foibles. The totem animals withdrew from us, for they were creatures of Magic and, deprived of worship, could not bear this fallen world of Reality with its plebian constraints for what is and is not possible. The totems are Wild animals, and it is in the Wild where they live and hunt, bloody in tooth and claw, while waiting for us to remember them and call their names once more.

If you, reader, would truly be as one with the animal inside you and have completed the preliminary trials, the next step is to open your mind, not just to becoming an animal, but to becoming the idea of an animal. You must see as your animal sees, hear as it hears, smell as it smells, taste as it tastes. But do not limit your senses to the material world. Strive to see as the animal sees in the Wild, where the idea of a thing is as real as the thing itself. No, more real. You must see as your animal sees when in the realm of thought and symbol. And so, ask yourself: Through which symbols does your animal see the world? Sun, Moon, Love, Rage, Fear, Youth, Age, Wisdom, Trickery, Air, Water, Fire, Earth, Fertility, Death. These are the most common and basic symbols which might attach to your spirit animal, but there are many others, as many as there are animals. As many as there are dreams about animals and people to dream them. When you dream about your spirit animal, what do you see? What does it see? What do you imagine seeing through its eyes? Focus on the eyes first, young Animagus. For as it was said long ago, the eyes are the windows to the soul.

Jim put the book back down and rubbed his own eyes. Then, he looked up into the mirror attached to the back of his desk and stared wearily into his own reflection and then more

deeply into the reflection of his own green eyes, the eyes he'd inherited from his mother. He and Harry both had Lily Potter's green eyes, but Harry's were more vivid. The color of the Killing Curse some had said, though Jim had mercifully never witnessed that spell being cast.

Well, there was that one time when he was a baby, but he didn't remember very much about that and tried not to think about what he did remember. He shook his head and set such thoughts aside.

"The eyes are the windows to the soul," he murmured. Then, Jim Potter closed his eyes and breathed slowly and deeply.

"*Quoth the Raven, Nevermore,*" he whispered while imagining watching the world through a raven's eyes, whatever that might mean. He opened his eyes and gasped. This was for three reasons, all equally compelling.

First, Jim's eyes were now solid black from pupil to iris to sclera. They did indeed look exactly like the eyes of a raven.

Second, the whole room around the boy became brighter thanks to the raven's superior night vision, and he was dazzled by his newfound ability to see in the ultraviolet spectrum. The room was now awash in colors he would never be able to describe to anyone else. There were simply no words.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Jim was startled to see an obese translucent man with a thick moustache standing behind him and staring down at him with an expression of pure malevolence.

"WHOOAH!" Jim yelled while jumping out of the chair and then knocking it over as he turned around to face the intruder.

"*Freeeeakk!*" growled Vernon Dursley in a voice like nails on a chalkboard.

"Dude! It's just a ghost!" hissed Steve, who lifted his head in his terrarium to watch the confrontation.

"Jim!" shouted James Potter as he burst into the room in response to his son's terrified yell. "What is it?!"

Startled, Jim squeezed his eyes shut out of reflex. When he opened them again, his vision had returned to normal, and there was no sign of the ghost that had frightened him. He shook his head and turned to face his father.

"It was nothing, Dad. I... just fell asleep at my desk. Must have had a nightmare that woke me up and made me yell. I'm sorry to have worried you."

James studied his son for a moment. Then, his expression softened. "Don't worry about it, son. You've been through so much recently. I don't blame you for nightmares. Do you want a Potion of Dreamless Sleep?"

"No, that's... that's okay, Dad. I'll just get into bed. I'm sure I'll be fine."

James nodded and wished his son good night before exiting the room and closing the door behind him.

Jim exhaled slowly and looked around the room for a moment. Then, he closed his eyes again and concentrated. When he opened them, his strange new "raven vision" had returned... along with the angry ghost that Jim now thought he recognized from old pictures.

"Vernon Dursley?!" he asked in shock.

In response, the mask of pure hatred on Vernon's face slowly melted away to be replaced by one of complete astonishment at having been recognized and named.

"Yes! Yes, that was my name! Vernon Dursley!" Vernon was speaking in a surprisingly reasonable tone for a dead man. Then, he suddenly grew confused. "Hang on. Do you mean to say you can actually see me?!"

Five minutes later...

"So... I'm dead?" Vernon asked incredulously. By this point, he was sitting on Jim's bed looking more depressed than spooky. Jim sat across from him in his desk chair and tried not to think about whether the ghost might leave some sort of ectoplasmic residue all over his bedsheets.

"Yeah. Since sometime in October of 1992. It's August of '94 now, so just under two years, I reckon."

Vernon nodded slowly. "I remember waking up in the night unable to breathe. I remember Petunia shaking me and screaming my name. I would have screamed myself if I could. I could feel my heart pounding, like it wanted to rip out of my chest. It was terrifying. And then, everything just went black."

He shuddered. "Everything after that is just a blur until you said my name. It was like... like hearing someone call me Vernon finally woke me up at last. Before that, it was just a lot of terrible nightmares where I spent my time trying to scare people out of the house even though, for some reason, I didn't really want them to go."

Jim nodded and explained what he'd learned about the ghostly condition after a late-night conversation with Nearly

Headless Nick. Most ghosts were wizards or witches because they had an internal reservoir of magic when they died, but ghosts could arise from deceased Squibs or even Muggles provided that they died in magically active areas or as a result of a magical attack. The one exception was the Killing Curse which, as far as anyone knew, never left ghosts behind. Most newly risen ghosts ceased to exist a few days after dying, with magical folk lasting longer as ghosts than those without magic. There were only two ways for a ghost to persist for longer. If the ghost haunted a sufficiently magically active building, either one connected to a ley line or one with an unusual number of wards and other long-term enchantments, the spirit could leech off the ambient magic to maintain a continued existence.

For ghosts without access to such magic, the situation was more dire. Such ghosts could only maintain their existence by feeding off the fear of mortals in their vicinity. Ghosts of that nature were classified as '*feral*' ghosts. There was speculation that they eventually evolve into poltergeists like Peeves, but that theory had never been confirmed. Regardless, feral ghosts were the reason for Muggle ghost stories, stories far more terrifying than one might expect after meeting the friendly and talkative ghosts found at Hogwarts and other ghost-laden magical sites. A feral ghost could exercise power over its surroundings in order to cause poltergeist-like phenomena specifically to frighten nearby Muggles, thereby generating the emotional energy needed to survive, but it was a balancing act. Scare the Muggles too much, and they would flee the haunt, depriving the ghost of sustenance. Making matters worse, ghosts who were reduced to feeding on human fear would not truly wake up and remember their prior lives. They acted more like intelligent predators concerned only with provoking the fear they needed to exist.

The reason there were so many ghosts at Hogwarts was that it was the Ministry's policy to convey ghosts who might otherwise have become feral predators and thus threats to the Statute of Secrecy to Hogwarts or to other magic-intensive locations that could support a large population of intelligent ghosts. In fact, the Hogwarts Charter specifically codified the agreement of the Founders that the school should be a sanctuary for the Restless Dead. While techniques existed to exorcise a ghost permanently, they could also be bound for a time instead, and so the most humane solution for most feral ghosts was to ship them to Hogwarts where they could fully awaken. The alternative was to keep the haunted area free of Muggles for as long as it took to allow the feral ghost to dissipate for good, although this was often viewed ethically as equivalent to killing a ghost a second time and was generally a last resort.

Of course, all the ghosts of Hogwarts were wizards and witches, at least as far as Jim knew. Most Muggle ghosts didn't last long enough to attract Ministry attention, and the few who did in the past were relocated to other places (although Sir Nicholas became evasive when asked where those places were). But Jim had certainly never heard of a Muggle ghost being brought to Hogwarts.

As for Vernon, he had likely subsisted on the renters who'd stayed at 4 Privet Drive after Petunia and Dudley's departure and only begun to awaken to full consciousness after the Potters reestablished and reinforced the wards that Dumbledore had put on the place when Harry was first sent there in 1981. That apparently had been enough-barely-to allow Vernon to remember his living days, a process which accelerated when Jim reminded him of his name.

"Does that mean I'll stay here forever?" he asked fearfully. "I wasn't exactly religious when I was alive, but I always felt

there was *some* kind of afterlife. Is... is this it?"

Jim shrugged. "I... don't know. Professor Dumbledore says that after death comes the *next great adventure*, but I don't know if that's anything more than wishful thinking. Maybe a ghost is someone who's afraid to go on. Or maybe a ghost is someone determined not to fade away to nothing."

The boy's face brightened. "My History of Magic teacher is a ghost. I can ask him." Then, his face fell. "Though, he's hard to get useful information out of. I'm not entirely sure he realizes he's dead."

Vernon looked amazed at that, but then shook his head and changed the subject. "Do you... do you know what happened to Pet, I mean... my wife and son? Are they alright? And where are they?"

"Well, I don't know exactly *where* they are," Jim replied earnestly. "But as far as I know, they're okay. They moved a few months after you died once the money from the... I wanna say, *injured ants*?"

"Insurance," Vernon supplied.

"Right. Anyway, Aunt Petunia got a lot of money from that, and she bought a house somewhere closer to that school Dudley's attending."

"Good, good," Vernon said with some satisfaction. "I always made a point of having the biggest life insurance policy I could get and also the biggest widow's pension that Grunnings offered."

His face darkened. "I always knew I'd die fairly young." He leaned towards Jim and gave him an intense expression.

"Jim, are you... *sure* my death was from natural causes? That there was nothing... *freakish* about it?"

Jim was taken aback. "By freakish, do you mean magical? 'Cause... that's kind of an offensive term to us."

Vernon made a face as he bit down on what was probably going to be a rude remark. After a few seconds, he spoke again.

"I'm... sorry. I didn't mean to offend. But still... was there magic involved in my death? Was it... *him*?"

Jim stiffened. "Do you mean Harry?"

Vernon nodded fearfully.

"Then no!" the boy snapped. "I may not like my brother very much at the moment, but I know he didn't do *anything* to kill you. He was at Hogwarts when you died, and I was there when he was told about it. He was completely shocked by the news."

Then, Jim's voice grew colder. "He also told us that you tried to murder him."

Vernon looked at the boy in surprise before shaking his head. "All I remember is trying to get him out of the house. That last day, he showed up waving his wand around, and then, those... *creatures* started swarming over the house. I knew they were after him. I thought maybe he summoned them or something. But all I knew was that they were trying to break in, and they'd have killed us all. So I grabbed the little monster and threw him out the back door."

He lifted his chin defiantly. "I know you're going to judge me harshly for that, but I have no regrets. I'd been waiting for

years until the day that *Freak* tried to kill us all, and when it finally came, I acted to save my family. If I had it to do over again, I'd do just the same. And *for the record*, when I call him *the Freak*, I don't care if it offends you... *because it fits him* . Since the day he came to us, he was... *unnatural* . I don't mean he was magical, although if I had my way, I'd have had no truck with that either. But even by the standards of your kind, he was... something else. Something... wicked."

Jim started to respond, but Vernon interrupted him. "Animals hated him. Did you know that? My sister's dog, Ripper. Scary name, I know, but it was the gentlest beast you'll ever see. But every time the Freak got near it, the dog went berserk. It seemed like every few weeks we'd have a meeting with his teacher telling us about how he terrified the other children or picked fights with them. One teacher quit altogether in the middle of the year after he turned her hair blue. It was *always* something like that with him."

"That's just accidental magic!" Jim sputtered. "It's not a sign of him being... evil!"

"Was it *accidental magic* when he threw hot bacon grease at my face? It almost blinded me! And then, he just *laughed*."

Jim stared at the ghost. "So if Harry was so awful, why didn't you call my Mum and Dad to come take him back? I *know* they told you to call them if he happened to show magic!"

Vernon looked down at the floor in defeat. "We tried, lad. We tried. We talked about it all the time back in the beginning. But every time we set out to call your mother, it would just... come over us. Like... like a wave drowning us."

"What would come over you?" Jim asked quietly.

"The fear," Vernon said in a shaken voice. "I can't explain it to you. But whenever we even contemplated sending the Freak away, Petunia and I would be overcome by a sense of... doom. A total certainty that if we tried to send him back to your parents, he would kill us all."

Vernon snorted. "He'd kill us if we sent him away. He'd kill us eventually if he stayed. And finally, somehow, he killed *me*. I just know it. The last *decade* of my life was spent waiting for the Freak to kill me and hoping, just hoping that my Petunia and my Dudley could get away."

Then, he sighed with a strange contentment. "And they did get away from him. So I guess I died well after all."

Jim shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. I know you believe what you're saying. I'm certain of it for some reason. But... Harry's not like that. I don't believe he was actually scheming to kill you or something like that. And he's not *evil* or... *freakish!*"

Vernon looked at the boy speculatively. "Isn't he? Jim, you and he look nearly the same. Yet you and I are sitting here talking, and I have *none* of the constant terror and anxiety and unnatural rage that I felt *every time he and I were in the same room!* And I knew him a lot longer than you have. Are you truly so certain that there's nothing wrong with him? You've never had any doubts about him?"

Jim swallowed. "Well, I mean, it was a little rough when we were starting out..."

"Uh-huh. Tell me, Jim. You and your family have moved into my old house. But where is your brother living now if not with you all?"

Jim looked away for a moment. "He's, um, living at Potter Manor. The house I grew up in."

"Oh? And how did that happen?"

"It's not important."

"Oh, Jim," Vernon said sadly. "I'll wager it's very important. How did he end up in your grand mansion while your whole family ended up here in the house where I died?"

The boy fumed. "I... don't really understand all the details except that it was mostly the fault of Uncle... I mean... my father's solicitor. But anyway, my father ended up owing Harry a magical debt that he couldn't repay. And so, to save my dad from dying due to breaching a magical oath, we had to give Harry our house and move into this one."

"Well, that was certainly convenient... for him at least," Vernon said rather snidely.

"Stop it! It wasn't like that!"

"Come on, lad. I know you distrust him at least a little. I don't know how, but I can sense it. Some bit of ghost freakishness, perhaps. But you know he's dangerous."

"I only distrust him because I'm under a spell!" Jim hissed quietly, afraid he'd lose his temper and wake his parents. "My... someone put a spell on me that causes me to distrust Harry."

Vernon chuckled. "Just because you're under a spell doesn't mean that distrusting him isn't the wise thing to do, lad. Just promise me that when you go back to Pigfarts or whatever that place is-you'll be careful around him. Or I promise, you'll regret it. He'll make certain of it."

Jim was silent. "I'd like to get some sleep now," he said after a long pause.

Vernon nodded. "Are you... are you going to tell your mum and dad about me?" he asked anxiously.

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it."

The ghost looked suddenly anxious. "If you do tell them, do you know what they'll do with me? I assume you lot have ways of... getting rid of problems like me."

Despite himself, Jim felt a wave of sympathy for the dead man whose house they'd claimed. He wasn't sure he believed anything the man had said about Harry, but he also wasn't sure what exactly would happen to him if the elder Potters decided to have him exorcised. He recalled once again the look on Sir Nicholas's face as he told Jim what was done with the ghosts of Muggles. Or more accurately, what Sir Nicholas pointedly did *not* say on the topic.

"I won't tell them anything right now," Jim finally said. "Provided you don't do anything to make me think you're a danger to me and my folks."

Vernon smiled. And then, he slowly faded from view.

4 August 1994

No. 12 Butterfield Lane, Oxford

The beetle flew into the townhouse through a cracked window in the boy's room just before dawn and quickly found a perch on top of a door frame where she could observe without being seen. After watching the house for a few days, she had figured out the Muggles' routine. Every morning around 9:00, the woman drove her son to a nearby sports center, which was probably for the best given the boy's size.

"Fair's fair, though," said the beetle to herself. "He's still overweight, but he seems to have lost a few stone since his father died, if those pictures on the mantle from his childhood are any guide. The exercise must have done him good. "

After dropping off the boy, the woman would return to the townhouse, pour herself a cup of tea (milk, no lemon), and watch the Muggle teleovisual thingee all day until it was time to pick the boy up around five. To the beetle, it seemed a drab, pointless existence, but she supposed that everyone dealt with grief in their own way.

At 9:05, moments after the Muggles' departure, the beetle flew down from her perch into the kitchen, but it was a witch whose feet landed on the floor in front of the refrigerator. Inside, there was a large jug of milk but also a smaller metal jug the Muggle woman used for her tea service. The witch produced a vial from one of her pockets and carefully doled out three drops into the milk and swirled it around. She returned the small jug to the refrigerator and then placed a spell upon it to let her know the next time it was removed from its position. The witch closed the refrigerator, became a beetle once more, and flew out of the townhouse.

Forty minutes later, the witch was sitting on a nearby park bench reading over her notes for her upcoming interview when she heard the ringing of a soft bell that no Muggle around could have detected. She glanced at her watch and waited for another fifteen minutes before packing up her papers into a satchel and then striding confidently down the sidewalk towards Number 12. Once at the door, she pressed the bell and waited. A few minutes later, the door opened to reveal the Widow Dursley, and while the Muggle was annoyed at the interruption of her routine, her eyes were

already slightly glassy with the tell-tale symptoms of the potion that had been slipped into her tea.

It was not Veritaserum, which was highly illegal to use on Muggles. Rather, it was the witch's personal blend of the Babbling Beverage, the Confusing Concoction, and Gregory's Unctuous Unction. When consumed, it would cause the drinker to become very talkative, to become eager to share secrets, and to consider the next person they saw to be incredibly trustworthy. Best of all, when the effects wore off, the drinker would have no memories of revealing any such secrets, and after a week, it was completely non-detectable. And even if discovered, it was only considered Class I Mugglebaiting, which held at most a 30 Galleon fine, which the Daily Prophet would pay.

"Yes?" snapped Petunia Dursley.

"Good morning! My name is Margarite Scarabee, and I'm a reporter. Could I come in and speak with you for a few minutes?"

Petunia blinked a few times, and then grudgingly welcomed her guest inside, neither knowing nor caring that the other woman was a witch.

An hour later...

To the reporter's consternation, Petunia Dursley had not been as good a source of gossip about the Potters as she'd hoped. She'd gotten loads of information about Lily Potter during their childhood, but the Muggle knew almost nothing about House Potter and its secrets beyond a general disdain for James Potter. And she knew *absolutely nothing* about the Boy-Who-Lived! Of course, Petunia apparently could talk for *days* about the sins and shortcomings of the former Harry

Potter, but her stories were outlandish, elevating what were obviously minor accidental magic episodes into deliberate attacks while attributing every bit of ill fortune her family had ever suffered to "*the Freak* ." Furthermore, she all but admitted to abusing the boy who'd been left in her care and was *proud* of having done so. Finally, before giving this interview up for a lost cause, the reporter tried one last tack.

"Mrs. Dursley," she said while removing a small glass object from her purse. "Would you do me the kindness of taking this item for a moment."

Petunia narrowed her eyes suspiciously, but she remained under the potion's effect. The Muggle reached out and took the Remembrall from the witch's hand. It immediately turned a violent red.

"What?!" Petunia said fearfully, only now realizing that her houseguest was a witch. "What is this thing?"

Rita Skeeter didn't answer. She just grinned from ear to ear.

Next: Little Hangleton.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Nothing new at the moment, I'm afraid.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: 100beep, AjithSen, AquaWolf, Azumi, Banshee, Bob, Cibirochka, cog and star (any). DA SWIMA BOI, dragonsandotters, Empathize_Not_Advise, EssayOfThoughts | Aich, ILoveTheBlacks, kean, Krisni, LFGB, Luq707, MoldyShorts, Mr. ZYesterday, Rubric of Ahriman, Sakkiko, scallionpancake, TNT, TrendyTreky, Tuesday, and WhoKnows. Thanks, guys!

AN4: I had originally stolen "Pigfarts" from "The Brother" by Magiclulajane, an interesting and witty take on WBWL which sadly hasn't been updated since 2016. I have since been informed that it was originally a thing in "A Very Potter Musical."

AN5: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 16,102. Followers: 16,850. Favorites: 15,036. Communities: 236. Discord followers: 4041! Go Team POS!

Little Hangleton

Chapter 7: Little Hangleton

Shameless plug! My first original novel, Strangers In Boston, is now for sale, and I am presently working on the sequel. Check out my website for more information: <https://thesinisterman.com/home/>.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Harry Black

and the Resurrection Game

Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.

Chapter 7: Little Hangleton

6 August 1994

"Blackstone Manor"

7:00 p.m.

At long last, Harry and his friends' summer lessons had ended, but the Brain Trust wasn't quite done yet. On Saturday, August 6th, the two exhibition matches held at Hogwarts took place before sizeable audiences, and Harry took great pride in informing Dumbledore how much money had been made for the Hogwarts General Fund. Hermione

had not attended the matches, but that was not terribly surprising. House pride was barely enough to induce the witch to come to the Gryffindor matches, after all. Instead, she spent part of the day at a Muggle library, though she did join Harry and her other friends for a final dinner party. Apparently, Harry had taught Buttercup how to make pizza and tacos, to the confusion and then delight of the Purebloods in attendance.

If any of Hermione's friends noticed the file folder that she had brought with her and handed off to Harry upon arrival, no one commented.

During the dinner, Harry officially announced that "Blackstone" would be the new name of the former Potter Manor. Ginny Weasley had proposed it, as Black was Harry's surname now and he was heavily integrated into House Black. The suggestion had won her a hefty gift certificate to Honeyduke's, which she looked forward to trying out, as she was a rising Third Year and would finally get to visit Hogsmeade.

"Well, *legally*, anyway," she admitted with a smirk. "I am a Weasley, after all, and the Twins told me where a few secret passages are. I'm pretty sure Ron and Percy are the only ones to have never snuck over to Hogsmeade without permission."

Ron was not present to respond to the dig as he had declined to come to the party claiming a prior engagement. He did, however, send a very nice thank-you note to Harry for allowing him to join Harry's study group over the summer. Harry hoped he would be able to have at least a cordial relationship with Jim's best friend despite the Oath of Enmity.

More than the Manor's name had changed. Going with Ginny's suggestion, Harry had arranged to have the sandstone walls of the former Potter Manor transfigured into a jet black. He'd also assisted Regulus in taking stones recovered from Chevenoir's fireplace-the only part of the original structure to survive its destruction-and using them to make a small black rock garden behind the house as a memorial to Arcturus Black. Sirius had been deeply moved when he saw it.

After dinner, the group retired to the Great Hall, which had been set up as the nerve center for Eye-Spy Productions. The room was presently home to an assortment of mirrors all of different sizes, each of which had been prepared to replay the day's Quidditch matches from different angles. The Brain Trust would review the playback on each screen and discuss their plans for editing them together. Harry made some comments but mentioned that he wouldn't be available the next day to help with the editing as he had a meeting with Lucius Malfoy about financing.

"That's okay, Harry," Sue said amiably. "Keeping our backers happy is probably as important as what we'll be doing."

Harry laughed, and so did everyone else. All except for Hermione, who merely smiled and nodded as the two of them made eye contact. Everyone headed home around 9:00 p.m. Hermione was the last to leave, and she paused at the Floo.

"Good luck," she said quietly before leaving. Harry quickly went up to his room and opened the folder containing Hermione's research.

"Yeah," he muttered to himself. "We'll probably need it."

Meanwhile at 4 Privet Drive

"The meal was delicious, Mrs. Potter," Ron said politely.

"What was it called again? *Pasghetti*?"

"Spaghetti," Lily replied with a smile. "Although, I think Jim called it *pasghetti* for a while when he was about four or so."

"*Muum!*" Jim wailed at his mother's attempt to embarrass him. Lily and James just laughed.

After dinner, the four retired to the living room to watch some television (which always amazed Ron). They all laughed over the latest episode of *Brittas Empire*, though Lily had to explain repeatedly that, no, Muggle leisure center managers were not that foolish, that everyone on the show was an actor, and they were all acting silly on purpose because it was a comedy. She also had to explain the concepts of "leisure center" and, to an extent, "comedy." Not for the first time, Lily marveled at the odd nature of wizarding pop culture.

The Statute of Secrecy came into existence at the dawn of the Restoration Era, which meant that wizards largely missed out on the advent of the Restoration Comedy. Indeed, in the decades prior to the Statute's enactment, Britain was ruled by Oliver Cromwell and the humorless Puritans who supported him, and theater had been outlawed. Thus, among wizards, comedy, at least on the stage, had largely stagnated since the time of William Shakespeare. The only exceptions came from those wizards and witches who actively embraced modern Muggle culture, and even they were mostly limited to Muggle books and stage plays. The Potters were quite literally the only wizarding family Lily knew of who had access to a television set. Consequently, the idea of a "situation comedy" or

indeed any form of comedy more modern than Vaudeville was largely unheard of.

"I still say you should try to figure out how to make magical television," Jim said to his parents with a grin. "I bet you could make a fortune that way."

Ron looked around the room in confusion. "Um, didn't you know? I think Harry's already doing that."

The three Potters all stared at him.

"What?" Jim asked with just a hint of anger. Ron swallowed, suddenly wishing he'd stayed silent.

"Um, he and his friends from the summer study group figured out how to make flying caramels."

The other three looked at him strangely.

"Caramels?" James asked.

"No, not caramels, I guess. Those things you use to record stuff like they show on the television."

"Ah, cameras, I think you mean," Lily said.

"Oh yeah, sorry. Cameras. Anyway, they've figured out how to make floating cameras that can record and save moving pictures like what they're showing here. They recorded the two Quidditch matches held today at Hogwarts and are gonna try to sell the recordings somehow."

Then, Ron actually quailed a bit in response to the look Jim was giving him.

"Harry's going to sell video recordings?! He stole my idea!"

"That will do, Jim," Lily said firmly. "You're not the first person to come up with the idea of video recording. Harry was raised Muggle, so it's no surprise that he considered it. Although I'm impressed if he and his friends solved the technical issues with a magical video camera."

"Yeah," Jim said bitingly. "I know how he was raised, Mum. I live down the hall from his old room, remember?"

"Jim!" James said firmly. "That's enough."

Jim opened his mouth and then closed it again. He spent the next half-hour or so sulking before finally announcing that he was tired and ready for bed. Ron, who was spending the night, spent that same half-hour wishing he'd kept his mouth shut.

Upstairs, Ron followed Jim into his bedroom. "Jim, I'm sorry I mentioned it. I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's not your fault, Ron. It's just... bloody Harry Black Lord Wilkes, the richest wizarding teen in the world, is getting even *richer*! And we're still struggling to stay afloat. It's not fair!"

"Is that you talking or the Imperius Curse?"

Jim turned angrily towards his best mate, who simply held up his hands in a placating manner. Meanwhile, Ghost-Vernon, who stood leaning against the far wall, spoke up.

"Oh Good Lord Above! What has the Freak done now?"

"You stay out of this!" Jim snapped only to remember that he was the only human present who could see Vernon. Ron was now staring at him wide-eyed in response to his outburst.

"Uh, Jim?"

Jim sighed and turned to Vernon. "Could you... I dunno, materialize or something so he can see you?"

"I have absolutely no idea how to do that. And I repeat my question. What has the Freak done now that has you so upset?"

The boy shook his head and ignored the question. He turned back to Ron who looked visibly concerned at his behavior.

"Okay, don't get upset at this but... my Uncle Vernon, who died in this house, is here as a ghost, but I'm the only one who can see him. It's somehow related to my Animagery. Apparently, ravens can see ghosts."

"Oookay," Ron said cautiously.

"I'm serious, Ron," Jim said.

Then, he closed his human eyes and opened his all-black raven eyes.

"Bloody hell!" Ron exclaimed as he instinctively fell back a step.

"Shhh! My Mum and Dad don't know yet!" He closed his eyes again and returned them to normal.

"So, can you do the whole transformation now?" Ron asked.

Jim exhaled angrily.

"*No* ! Well, not intentionally, at least. I've turned completely into a raven about three times, but never intentionally. And it takes me forever to change back! And every time I do, I'm still *naked* !"

"Indeed you are," muttered Vernon. "It's as indecent as it is unnatural!"

Meanwhile, Ron fought down a snicker.

"It's *not* funny!" Jim snapped.

"Oh come on!" Ron replied. "It totally is! If I were trying to become an Animagus and ended up starkers all the time, you'd be laughing your arse off at me!"

Jim gave Ron a foul look before finally bursting into laughter.

"Yeah, alright, maybe I would. But after a few weeks of it, it's getting old. At least I haven't come out of it naked and a mile away since that first night."

"I think I remember that," Vernon said thoughtfully. "Yes, I'm pretty sure I slammed the window on your fingers!"

Jim glared at the ghost who simply shrugged sheepishly. "Sorry?" he said.

"Look," Ron said. "Your dad is an Animagus. It was all over the papers. Why haven't you asked him how to transform without showing off your bits to everyone? I'm sure he had to deal with that too when he was just learning how."

Jim shook his head. "I'm an *illegal* Animagus, Ron. I could get into a lot of trouble if I get caught. And Dad could get into a lot of trouble if he's caught helping me."

Ron nodded. "Okay, how about this? I'll ask him tomorrow. I'll say I heard about him being one and I was interested in what's involved. You come up with a list of questions for me, and I'll ask them tomorrow at breakfast."

"Would you, Ron?" Jim asked excitedly. "That would be awesome!"

The other boy shrugged and blushed a bit. "Hey, anything for my best mate." Then, he looked around the room. "So, um, being a raven Animagus lets you see ghosts? I thought all wizards could see ghosts. I never heard of any ghosts at Hogwarts that were invisible."

"I think it's because there's not as much ambient magic here as at Hogwarts. Uncle Vernon doesn't have enough magic in him to remain visible all the time. I can only see him because there's a connection between ravens and death."

Ron crooked an eyebrow. "Oh, is there? Wonderful. Are you *sure* this is something you need to be mucking about with on your own?"

"Well, I'm not *entirely* on my own. Remus Lupin sent me a book containing notes on the transformation. It's helped a lot. Well, not with the actual transformation itself, but with the theory and whatnot."

Then, he looked at Ron with a curious expression.

"Say, are you sure you don't want to learn to be an Animagus?"

"Very! I'm already a Parselmouth, a beginner Wu Xi Do martial artist, and an overworked delivery boy for my Mum's magical catering business. There's only so many hours in the day, you know?"

Jim laughed. "Fair enough. I hope your Mum's paying you at least."

"She is, actually," Ron said proudly. "First time I've had my own spending money in my whole bloody life."

Jim was surprised by that, and he looked at his best friend speculatively. But before he could say anything about what was on his mind, Ron looked around the room carefully and turned the topic back to that of Ghost-Vernon.

"So, anyway, you have an invisible ghost that only you can see. And your parents don't know about it because...?"

The other boy sighed. "Because... I'm not entirely sure what the Ministry does to the ghosts of Muggles. But I'm kind of worried that it's something... not good. Can you keep this a secret for now?"

Ron smiled. "Of course. What's *one more* secret we're keeping?" Then, he furrowed his brow. "Hey, your Uncle Vernon's not going to, I don't know, spy on me while I'm sleeping or taking a shower, is he?"

"Certainly not!" Vernon exclaimed, though Ron couldn't hear him. "How dare you insinuate such a thing!"

"*Duuude*," said Steve, Jim's kingsnake, who had been resting quietly in his terrarium until now. "*You were totally creeping on Jimbo here every night until he finally noticed you were here.*"

Vernon spluttered at that, while Jim turned to his pet snake.

"Yeah, Sssteve. And thank you ssso much for not sssharing that with me!"

The kingsnake gave an odd trembling motion which both Jim and Ron recognized as the serpentine equivalent to a shrug. "Jimbo, you and Big Red had ghostsss *all over the place*

back at Hogwartsss. I figured you were ussed to it, and you were jussst ignoring the Walrusss over there."

Ron's eyes widened as Steve confirmed the ghost's existence and presence while Vernon just fumed silently at the snake's insults about his appearance. Jim looked back and forth between the two, slipping in and out of Parseltongue as necessary.

"Okay, Sssteve, how can you even see Uncle Vernon? And Uncle Vernon, how can you understand my pet snake?"

"Eh, mossst animalsss can sssee ghostsss. It's jussst, mossst of the time they ignore usss, so we return the favor. Live and let live." Steve turned his head from Jim towards Vernon. "No offense... Walrus."

"And I have no idea how I'm able to understand that... *reptile* !" Vernon said while ignoring Steve's comments. "More freakishness, I suppose."

"I have asked you *not* to use that word," Jim spat through gritted teeth.

"Jim," Ron said tiredly. "I'm going to bed now. This conversation is too weird for me, especially since I can only hear two thirds of it. I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay, Ron. Good night." Then, as Ron put his hand on the door, he spoke again. "Hey, Ron? Thanks. For everything."

Ron smiled wanly. "What are best mates for?"

7 August 1994

Malfoy Manor

Brunch

"Well, Harry," said Lucius Malfoy languidly. "You called for this meeting. And *a/so* insisted I find a pretext to send Draco away. I assume you have some information to share with us about the fourth Horcrux."

There were four people sitting on Malfoy's veranda: Harry, Lucius, Regulus Black, and Severus Snape. Harry frowned as he took a sip of tea.

"Information to share," he said ruefully. "That's one way of putting it."

He took a moment to collect his thoughts as he recalled the Secret which Erasmus Wilkes had revealed to him.

Five days earlier in the Wilkes Office...

"Just outside the village of Little Hangleton, down the Old Mill Road about two miles past the Hangleton Bridge, lies a deserted shack where the last of the Gaunts once dwelt, and inside, guarded by traps and curses meant to slay any intruders not loyal to the Dark Lord, rests a golden treasure chest within which the secret of Voldemort's restoration lies hidden. "

Harry stared at the portrait nonplussed. "So... this... *golden treasure chest* you need me to find. It's hidden in a box in a shack in the woods past the bridge down the Old Mill Road? I'm surprised it's not in a box on a boat with a hole in the bottom of the sea."

"What?" Wilkes asked in confusion.

"Never mind," Harry said. "It's a line from an annoying children's song."

"Oh really?" the Toymaker exclaimed excitedly. "How does it go? I *love* children's songs. They're so *peppy*!"

"I'll try to bring a recording when I return," Harry said drily. "But in the meantime, can you give me any more information? What sort of traps are we talking about? What's this golden treasure chest? And since I'm a minor who can't travel easily during the summer, why can't I bring an adult we can trust here so you can reveal the Secret to them?"

"Well," Wilkes began before stopping abruptly. "Wait. Secret? You're familiar with the Fidelius Charm?"

Harry waived his hand dismissively. "Everyone knows about the Fidelius, Father. The Potters used one to hide from our Lord, but they were stupid and trusted the wrong person to keep their Secret. Naturally, I took an interest in all the details of the Dark Lord's fall, including the workings of the Fidelius. *Although* I was not aware that a Secret could be as... complicated as what you just told me."

Wilkes shrugged. "It was an interesting experiment. A Secret must consist of a single sentence, but the rules for how many words, phrases, or clauses it could incorporate were... fuzzy. So for this Secret, we decided to incorporate as many details as possible in hopes of providing the highest level of occlusion, on top of the most devilish traps and curses that Boruslav, T... er, the Dark Lord, and I could devise."

"Right. So... my questions?"

"Ah, yes! Sorry! I'm afraid I'm all giddy and distracted now on account of finding out I'm dead and also a father. And most remarkably, in *that order* ! But to answer your first

question, you needn't worry about the traps because the defenses are all psycho-reactive. So long as your loyalty to our Lord's cause is absolute, they will all remain inactive. But if you show *any* doubts or hesitation about restoring Lord Voldemort to his full power, well, there goes the last bit of House Wilkes, I suppose."

"One would think," Harry said with asperity, "that my father's portrait would be more interested in making sure that his son and Heir didn't *die* in a failed attempt to resurrect our Lord."

"Family's important, m'boy," the man said brightly before his expression darkened. "But *not* as important as the Goal. If you aren't committed to the Goal, well to be honest, I'd rather you died horribly than live to deliver a portion of our Lord's *soul* to his enemies for destruction. Consider this an epic challenge of worthiness. *A Test of Loyalty and Devotion!*"

Harry snorted softly. "Well, can you at least tell me what *the Goal* is? All I know is what the *Goyles* had to say about the Dark Lord's agenda, and that was a bit... simplistic. Am I right in thinking that there's more to being a part of Lord Voldemort's Inner Circle than '*Blargh! Kill the Mudbloods! Blargh!*' I mean, I hate Mudbloods as much as the next fellow, but there has to be more to it than that?"

Wilkes giggled excitedly for several seconds. "Oh, you *are* a clever clogs! Yes, Harry, there was a lot more to the Inner Circle's goals than genocide against our inferiors. Honestly, that was simply an enjoyable leisure activity for most of us. Lord Voldemort's *true* goal was... *visionary!*"

"Uh-huh. Care to share that vision with me?"

"When you've brought me the box, Harry. When I know you're truly one of us! Then, I'll tell you all about that. But not before."

He held up his hand to stop Harry from inquiring further about that topic.

"Now then, moving on to your second question, you can't take anyone with you, and we can't share the Secret with anyone else because, honestly, I don't know who's left that we can trust. From what you told me, Boruslav and the Lestrangle woman are dead, while Gus has scampered off somewhere and is incommunicado. Mr. January might be a possibility, but I'm not sure. As of the last time I was updated, he wasn't finished cooking. That leaves the Selwyns, and I'm not sending my only begotten son to meet with those nutters. I mean, I'm an enthusiastic serial killer with a body-count in the hundreds, and even I think the Selwyns are *creeeeeeepy*."

"But..."

"No, Harry. If getting past the traps is a Test of Loyalty and Devotion, then consider this a Test of Cleverness. Let's see if you can figure out how to get some expendable patsy to convey you to Little Hangleton. Get one of the Goyles to take you. They're both stupid! Or if that's too risky, you can always call it a Test of Patience instead. Just wait a few years until you're old enough to Apparate!"

"A few years?!"

Wilkes grinned wickedly. "What can I say, Harry? I'm a portrait now. Lacking the sense of urgency that mortality imposes, I can afford to kick back and take these things slow and easy. Besides, in the end, time is nothing but an illusion,

just a lie we tell ourselves so that things don't all happen at once!"

Harry sighed in annoyance. "Fine. So what can you tell me about this golden treasure chest?"

Wilkes blew on his pipe and bubbles floated up out of the end. "Not much to tell. It's a golden box that can only be opened with the magic words. I'm quite certain you'll recognize it when you see it. It's... distinctive. But the treasure you seek is inside. Well, there's actually more than one treasure inside. In fact, there's a treasure on the outside too if you want to get technical about it. But just say the magic words-in Parseltongue, of course-and it will open right up."

"And what *are* the magic words?"

The Toymaker snickered. "I tell you what, son-of-mine. If you can't figure it out on your own, bring the box back here to me and I'll tell you. And then mock you for how poorly you were raised."

Harry glared at the portrait and tried a few more approaches, but Erasmus Wilkes had nothing left to share.

Now...

Harry took a deep breath. "The Secret to the Fourth Horcrux is... complicated. And also kind of long. Over sixty words, in fact. I can't tell any of you the actual Secret, which means a lot of information is blocked from direct transmission. *But* I've learned that I *can* tell you things *about* the Secret. Peripheral information is okay to share so long as it doesn't invade the specific text of the Secret itself."

"What sort of peripheral information?" Snape asked.

"Well for starters, I would be very grateful, Mr. Malfoy, if you would make us all portkeys that will carry us to Sheffield tomorrow morning. I know it's short notice, but the World Cup prelims start tomorrow, which will provide a distraction in case anything we do sets off any Ministry alarms."

"Sensible, I suppose," said Malfoy. "But why Sheffield? I assume the Horcrux isn't there or else you couldn't have given us that city name."

"It's not. I wish I could tell you where it was. It would make things a lot easier if I could give you the name of... the specific place we're going. But I can't. So instead, we're all going to get motor coach tickets from Sheffield to Doncaster. And then, at a certain point, I'll be getting off. Obviously, I can't tell any of you where to get off, but if you choose to follow me, well, that's not my fault."

"What is a... *motor coach*?" Malfoy asked in confusion.

"It's sort of like the Knight Bus except not insane," Regulus said. "So can I assume that Muggle attire will be needed?"

Harry nodded and then looked cautiously towards Snape and Malfoy.

"I believe we are both capable of passing as Muggles if necessary, Black," Snape snapped. "Or at least I can. Though I suspect Lucius's *hair* might stand out on a motor coach in Yorkshire."

Lucius sniffed disdainfully. Then, he touched his wand to the side of his head and snapped out three words Harry had never heard before. Instantly, the patrician Pureblood's long

golden locks shrank back into his head before turning a dark brown.

Harry looked simultaneously awestruck and vexed. "You mean this whole time there were Charms to fix one's hair and *nobody told me about it*? I've been spending a fortune on *Sleekeazy* all these years for nothing?!"

"Focus on what's important, Harry!" Regulus snapped.

"Typical!" Lucius snorted. "Only a Metamorphmagus would fail to see the importance of proper hair care." He glanced to his left. "Oh, and Potions Masters, I suppose."

Snape rolled his eyes at Malfoy before turning to Harry.

"So phase one is to travel by coach through Yorkshire, using the fiction that we are trailing you rather than traveling with you to bypass the Fidelius. What then?"

"Then, you three do a bit of investigating among the locals since I doubt that they'll want to talk to a 14-year-old. I can't tell you specifically what to look for, but you know Voldemort's real name and his Wizarding lineage. Ask the locals about that. I think it would be helpful if you know some of the local history as it pertains to Tom Marvolo Riddle... which, by the way, is *not* part of the Secret, so I can talk about him freely. In the meantime, I'll be getting a map of... the area and figuring out exactly where to go."

Lucius's eyes brightened as he made a mental note of what the boy did and did *not* say. He'd advised them indirectly to inquire about Tom Riddle and about the Gaunt family but then revealed that the name Tom Marvolo Riddle was not a part of the Secret. Which meant that the name "Gaunt" was!

"I see now!" he exclaimed. "We're doing discovery theater!"

"Discovery... theater?" Harry said hesitantly.

"Yes! An advanced Slytherin technique that will serve you well as Prince. It refers to strategies to use when you need someone to know a bit of information in order to manipulate them but cannot tell them directly lest the knowledge that it came from you affect their reactions. My congratulations! I was nearly sixteen when I mastered this art!"

"... Thanks?" Harry replied.

"Ahem!" Regulus interrupted before turning to Harry.
"Anything else we should be doing?"

"Only one thing between now and when we get to... where we're going."

Harry paused and chose his words carefully.

"Mr. Malfoy, speaking *purely hypothetically*, what sort of magic would *you* use to protect a location so that it would only let in people who were completely loyal to *you* but would kill anyone who tried to get in that *wasn't* loyal? And how would you get around such protections?"

Lucius sighed. "The possibilities are, well, not *endless* . But fairly broad. Perhaps we should adjourn to my library for some research."

"Wonderful," Regulus griped. "I might as well be back at school!"

The Little Hangleton Bus Station

8 August 1994

11:00 a.m.

As the coach made its morning stop in the rustic village of Little Hangleton ("rustic" being the word travel agents used to describe decayed towns on their last legs), the coach driver was surprised when four people—three men and one teen—actually got off. It had been *years* since anyone had actually gotten *off* the bus at Little Hangleton.

Of the four males, one looked nothing like Harry Black, another looked nothing like Regulus Black, and a third looked just a bit like Lucius Malfoy—if the notorious Lord Malfoy had short brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard instead of the long golden tresses for which Malfoy men were known. The man who looked a bit like Malfoy was distinctly unhappy to be wearing *denim jeans*, which was apparently the name Muggles gave to their most uncomfortable form of wearing apparel.

Alas, the burdens one must bear when searching for fragments of a Dark Lord's soul.

The fourth male who disembarked looked *exactly* like Severus Snape in all-black Muggle attire and his hair pulled back in a ponytail, as he honestly thought that the others were simply being paranoid and that such subterfuge was unnecessary.

Once he'd stepped off, Harry mentally reviewed what he'd learned from Hermione's thorough research. Little Hangleton was a tiny Yorkshire village, population 53. It was separated from the larger and more important Greater Hangleton (population 1,845) by the Hangleton River and the Hangleton Bridge that spanned it. The larger village was the former home of Riddle Textile Works, once a very profitable textile mill founded in 1803. During its heyday, it made the

Riddle family quite wealthy, and they owned most of the land in Little Hangleton, which they managed to have incorporated as a separate community in 1869 as part of a tax avoidance scheme.

Sadly, the Riddle family's dominance of the region came to an end in 1943 when Thomas and Mary Riddle, along with their son, Tom Jr., were all found dead under suspicious circumstances. While Riddle Sr. had a will, it left everything to his wife and son who died alongside him. None of them had any other known heirs. With no clear ownership, Riddle's various creditors foreclosed on his properties, the mill went out of business, and both Little and Greater Hangletons went into a state of perpetual decline.

"Okay," said Harry, "let's meet in front of that pub in an hour. I'll be invisible, since I've no wish for a repeat of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Peril*."

"What on Earth does *that* mean?" Lucius asked in confusion.

"Trust me, Lucius," Regulus muttered. "Ignorance is bliss."

The four wizards split up, with Harry ducking into an alley and reaching into the satchel he carried for a shimmery cloth-the Potter Invisibility Cloak. Harry figured if ever there had been a time to break it out of its vault, walking through a village of Muggles who might be cursed to hate him at any moment while on his way to collect a Horcrux was probably it. He threw the cloak over his head. Then, for good measure, he popped the Black Wand out of its holster and cast a mild Muggle-Repelling Charm over himself so that no one would bump into him. The Black Wand still wasn't as comfortable to use as his holly-and-phoenix wand. It was a powerful wand, to be sure, but it seemed to resent him using it. Harry couldn't decide if the wand disapproved of being wielded by

a Halfblood or if it was just angry that he hadn't used it to cast any Dark curses yet.

An hour later, the group reunited at the pub. Harry quickly joined the three adult wizards in case there were any problems, but so far none of the Muggles paid him any mind even after removing his cloak. Indeed, the only one to draw any attention at all was Lucius, and that was for asking the barkeep if he could see the wine list. The Muggle stared at him for several seconds before tersely responding: "We got white and red. Take your pick."

The Pureblood chose water.

Regulus and Snape, meanwhile, each ordered a pint while Harry took a fizzy drink. Once the drinks arrived at their corner booth, Lucius discreetly produced his wand under the table and wordlessly cast a powerful Notice-Me-Not Charm to make sure they were neither disturbed nor overheard.

"Well, speaking for myself," Lucius began after taking a sip of water and grimacing at the taste, "I must confess I was unable to acquire any useful knowledge. Beyond, of course, the fact that the denizens of Little Hangleton fulfill the worst stereotypes of Muggles. If Tom Marvolo Riddle spent any time here, much of his attitude towards them can be explained."

Regulus laughed. "Well, I wouldn't go *that* far. Of course, I was raised by Walburga Black, so the worst stereotype of Muggles I've ever heard were claims that they are, in fact, a different species from wizards entirely and are essentially a breed of hairless baboons who somehow learned to dress themselves. That said, I wasn't able to learn much either."

"Well then," Severus drawled, "it is fortunate that you three Great Princes brought me along, as I obtained a wealth of

information through superior cunning and perhaps a more amiable personality."

At that comment, Regulus nearly choked on his beer, while Lucius merely snorted.

"Amiable... personality, Severus? And which bottle did you drink out of to acquire *that* trait?"

"I drank nothing, Lucius," the Potions Master said imperiously. "Though I may have perhaps aerosolized a dose of Unctuous Unction and incorporated it into the cologne I sprayed on myself moments after separating from you all."

"You can turn a potion into an aerosol?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Normally, no, but the formula for the Unction is primarily an admixture of various essential oils which can easily be suspended in a mist form with the addition of..."

"No. One. Cares."

Snape glared at Regulus for so rudely interrupting his lecture. Then, he reached into a pocket and produced a Muggle pen and a hand-sized memo pad which he opened and flipped through.

"In that case, I shall move on to my findings. To begin with, this village is indeed the last known domicile of the Gaunt family, though that fact is known only to the older villagers as no Gaunts have been seen in these parts in over fifty years. Marvolo Gaunt is remembered as a deranged tramp who lived in a dilapidated shack somewhere just outside of town with two children, one male, one female. The son's name was Morfin. No one recalled the name of the daughter-who we know as Merope Gaunt-but a few of the eldest

Muggles recalled stories from their childhood of a scandal involving her and Tom Riddle Jr., the son of the local textile magnate who essentially owned most of the town."

"Now we're getting somewhere!" Regulus exclaimed.

"Indeed. The details are vague, as the story began sometime in the mid-1920s. Only two of those I spoke to were old enough to remember back that far. But apparently, Morfin Gaunt, an addled young man with a speech impediment that left him unable to speak in anything other than *strange hissing sounds*, attended a May Day festival and caused a disturbance of some kind. Interestingly, neither of the witnesses I spoke to remembered *what kind* of disturbance it was beyond the fact that several Muggles were injured."

Lucius nodded. "In other words, the fool breached the Statute of Secrecy to the extent that Obliviators were called in. I'll have my people at the Ministry begin a search for the DMLE records from that era."

Snape resumed. "The *scandal* part of the story takes place a few weeks later, when Tom Riddle Jr., who was already engaged to a local girl, *disappeared* from Little Hangleton. He reappeared after many months had passed, claiming that a woman, almost certainly Merope, had '*hoodwinked*' him into a marriage which was quickly annulled upon his return. Despite the annulment, Tom Riddle Jr. never remarried and, in fact, seldom left the Riddle house for the remainder of his life. There was speculation that whatever had happened to him during his absence had driven him mad."

"Yeah," Regulus said. "If Merope was as bad as her father and brother, I imagine getting Charmed to marry her and run off together would have done it."

Harry shook his head. "Merope Gaunt was a Squib, though. Or at least, she never got a Hogwarts letter. She couldn't have used a Charm."

"I agree," said Snape. "I think she most likely used Amortentia on Riddle. As an Ancient and Noble House, the Gaunts probably would have had a supply of it. It was commonplace among the Great Houses for facilitating arranged marriages, but it is a potion to which Muggles often react very poorly and which frequently damages mental health."

He paused, suddenly wondering if his own father's propensity for violence might have been the result of a "poor reaction" to Amortentia. He quickly pushed the thought aside.

"In any event, the Riddles, both parents and the son, largely withdrew from society from then on until their mysterious deaths in the Summer of 1943."

"By mysterious," said Lucius, "I assume you mean magical?"

"There were no wounds, no traumas, no signs of poison. All three died instantly without leaving a mark. Classic signs of the Killing Curse."

Harry whistled. "Tom Marvolo Riddle's homecoming. That would have been the summer after the Chamber of Secrets business, which was also when he accidentally turned himself into a sociopath. But how did he kill three people with the Killing Curse at age 16 without setting off the Trace?"

"I have no idea. The Muggles I interviewed believed that the Riddles were actually murdered by a young man named Frank Bryce who worked as a gardener and caretaker for the

Riddles. There was no real reason for the suspicion of Bryce beyond the fact that the local police interviewed him. He lived, and *still* lives, in a small house at the edge of the Riddle property and so would have had access to the home. Perhaps it might be worthwhile to speak with him. And also pay a visit to the scene of the crime."

The three adult Slytherins turned as one to look at Harry expectantly, as he alone knew the Secret that had led them to this village. Somewhat daunted by their expectant looks, he coughed in embarrassment.

"Um, yeah, couldn't hurt, I guess," he said somewhat evasively.

Thirty minutes later, the quartet entered the decrepit Riddle Manor.

"Watch your step, Harry," Regulus cautioned.

"You think there might be danger in here?" the boy asked.
"After all these years?"

"Danger takes many forms," the older Black said. "Honestly, my biggest fear is the floor caving in or the roof falling down on our heads."

Lucius ignored them in favor of casting multiple Revelios before moving on to more obscure investigatory Charms.

"Only one person, a Muggle, has been inside this house within the last three years, which is as far back as my revelatory spells can detect."

"Everyone!" Snape called. "Come here!"

The other three followed the Potions Master's voice into a parlor to find him standing in front of the cold fireplace. He was looking up at a portrait that was covered in dust and faded with age. Three people were depicted, one of whom made Harry gasp in surprise.

"That's..." he paused. "No, wait... it's not. But that kid looks almost *exactly* like Tom Riddle from the Horcrux-Diary. The hair's a little different but the resemblance is otherwise spot on."

Snape cleaned away the dust with a sweep of his wand. At the bottom of the painting was a worn brass placard.

The Riddles

Thomas, Mary, and Tom Jr.

September 1921

"From what we know of Tom Marvolo Riddle," Regulus said, "he wasn't born until 1926. So undoubtedly, the young man in this picture is his father as a youth."

"There are other pictures of him on the walls that show him older," Harry said. "Take a look at this."

The boy pointed to an old black and white photograph dated 1933. It showed the three Riddles seated on a couch. The older Riddles bore stern and somewhat weary expressions, but Harry's eyes were drawn to the younger man, though younger was a relative term. By all rights, Tom Riddle Jr. should still be under 30 in this photo, but his hair was *white*, while his face bore a haunted and broken expression. He seemed closer to fifty than thirty.

"Oh, yeah," Regulus said. "*Definitely* not a happy marriage."

Their discussion of the younger Muggle was interrupted by the sound of the front door opening.

"OI! WHO'S IN 'ERE MUCKIN' ABOUT?!" bellowed someone in a raspy voice. Before anyone else could react, Lucius whipped out his wand and cast a spell. To Harry's surprise, he felt the familiar sensation of an egg being cracked over his head even though Malfoy wasn't close enough to touch him.

"Do not move," said Malfoy softly. *"Do not speak above a whisper."*

Seconds later, the four wizards watched as an elderly man crept through the doorway holding a shotgun. He scanned the parlor carefully but was unable to see them even though they stood boldly in the middle of the room. Slowly, Snape drew his own wand.

"**CONFUNDO NONTEMPUS.**" Instantly, the man froze in mid-step. To Harry, the effect seemed similar to the Petrificus Totalus except that the man's limbs didn't slam together. Instead, he simply stopped moving. Snape stepped closer and gazed deeply into the old man's eyes.

"**LEGILIMENS,**" he murmured softly.

"What is Confundo Nontempus?" asked Harry, who was always interested in learning a new spell.

"A modified Confundus," Lucius explained. "It replicates the Petrification Hex but leaves no signs of its use and, more importantly, leaves the target with no memories of the time spent petrified. And because of its nature, it does not count as a memory-altering Charm and so cannot be detected by a Remembrall."

"Uh-huh. And that wordless Mass Disillusionment?"

"A proprietary spell of my own design created during my Mastery," Malfoy replied in a tone suggesting he was unlikely to share any more details about any of his proprietary magic.

After a moment, Snape touched his wand to the side of the man's head and muttered a soft incantation. In response, a trickle of silver fluid began to leak from the man's right eye like tears. With another wand flick, the silvery liquid floated through the air into an open vial which Snape casually produced and then stoppered. That done, he turned to his companions.

"This man is Frank Bryce, who was falsely accused of murdering the Riddles in 1943. He still works as a caretaker and security guard in exchange for free room and board in the caretaker's house at the edge of the Riddle property."

Lucius's eyes narrowed. "Who is paying him?"

"A law firm in London that oversees the Riddle property on behalf of an unidentified purchaser who bought the land sometime in the 1970s for unspecified 'tax purposes.' I have withdrawn his memories pertinent to that topic for you to review later, Lucius. I also have some other memories more immediately relevant to our investigation."

"Oh?" asked Harry.

"Yes. On the night the Riddles were slain, he witnessed a young man heading up to the house clutching what is clearly a wand, though Bryce did not recognize it as such at the time. I wish for you to view the memory to confirm, Harry, but based on your description, I feel certain it was Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"Is there anything else we need to do here?" Regulus asked cautiously. "This place is starting to give me the willies."

The other wizards agreed and made their way out of the house. Snape explained that Bryce would come out of his stupor within a few minutes with no memory of the elapsed time.

"So what now?" Lucius asked once they were out of the ruined house.

"Now?" Harry said. "We go for a walk."

From the Riddle home, it was indeed a fairly long walk that took the four wizards back into Little Hangleton. In the center of the hamlet, Harry stopped and pulled out a map of the area that he'd acquired from a local shop and made some notes on. He took a left and headed out of town in another direction that followed along the Old Mill Road. They soon passed by the Little Hangleton Cemetery before crossing the bridge over the Hangleton River (which was actually barely a stream at this point). Past the bridge, there were fewer signs of civilization and more woods, as the Riddles had purchased much of this land back in the 1870s with the goal of turning it back into a forest for hunting purposes.

After another half-hour, Harry stopped abruptly, checked his map, and then confirmed his location with an orienteering Charm Regulus had shown him the night before. The three adult wizards waited patiently. Harry began walking again, but more slowly, as he continually scanned the left side of the road for... *something*. After about a hundred yards, he found it: a narrow trail leading off the main road that was almost completely overcome with brush and vegetation.

Harry turned off of Old Mill Road and started for the trail when Regulus grabbed him by the shoulder.

"If it's all the same, Harry, I'll take point."

"How?" Harry asked. "You probably won't even be able to see what we're looking for until you walk right into it."

Regulus stopped with a chagrined expression. "Fine. I will walk in front with you close behind me."

Harry frowned but nodded, and the group continued on down the barely visible path which opened up into a clearing about fifty feet from the road.

"Stop!" Harry said firmly, and Regulus froze in response. Lucius took out his wand and cast a number of detection spells.

"I see the remains of a Muggle-Repelling Charm that probably collapsed decades ago," he said. "Nothing else out of the ordinary."

"Uh-huh," Harry said while staring into the clearing with an intense expression. "Does anybody notice anything odd up ahead?"

All three men claimed to see nothing but an empty clearing. Harry, however, saw a dilapidated shack ahead of them. It was small, no more than twenty feet on a side, though with Expansion Charms, it could easily be bigger on the inside. From his vantage point, Harry could see a snakeskin nailed to the front door.

Somewhat more troubling was the *sea of black adders* that surrounded the shack on all sides! Harry estimated there were *hundreds* of them writhing all over each other. And

they were almost certainly enchanted as well. These snakes had apparently been here since Voldemort and Wilkes set up the protections for this place decades earlier-presumably without a regular food source-and they all seemed in good health. Perhaps most disturbingly, every one of the snakes had its head raised, and they were all staring directly at the quartet with unmistakable hostility.

"What do you see, Harry?" Snape asked. Harry turned to the other men and described the scene as he perceived it. All three of them looked at him strangely.

"What do you see, Harry?" Snape asked again with exactly the same tone and inflections as the first time he'd asked the question.

Harry pinched his nose angrily. "What I see is that the Fidelius is still the most annoying Charm in the world!" he growled before addressing Snape's question.

"Okay, let's just say for now that if any of you take more than about ten steps forward, you will probably die horribly. Professor Snape, did you bring any bezoars, perhaps? I only have one."

"I have six," the Potions Master said flatly.

"And I have another two," Lucius added. Regulus just shook his head.

"I am beginning to feel insecure in my fitness for Slytherin," he said irritably. "I don't have any."

"Well, don't worry," Harry said, "because it may not matter. Is it possible to enchant a venomous creature so that a bezoar won't protect against it?"

Snape looked doubtful, but Lucius spoke up first. "Yes. Boruslav Lestrangle bred a number of Komodo dragons to guard his estate. He claimed that their venom could overcome a bezoar. And we are operating under the theory that Wilkes, the Dark Lord, *and* Lestrangle played a role in devising protections for this... seemingly empty clearing, yes?"

"Yes," Harry said ruefully as he turned back to the shack and the hundreds of adders who protected it. Cautiously, he took a few steps forward and then hissed softly.

"I come in peaccce. I wasss ssent by Erasssmussss Wilkesss to claim that which he and the Dark Lord hid here ssso long ago."

The massive colony spoke as one, hissing in perfect unison. It was quite daunting.

"To passs by usss, you mussst prove your complete loyalty, ssstranger. "

"What mussst I do?"

"You mussst allow one of usss to bite you. The blood of the Massster flowsss through our venom and will judge you. If your ssspirit is true, you ssshall passs through usss unssscathed. If not, you ssshall sssurely die! "

Harry nodded slowly and took a step back.

"Yeah. Pretty sure that's not gonna happen," he thought. Then, he closed his eyes in concentration. *"Well, Mark? Any sssuggestionsss? "*

"Only that you be cautioussss, my Massster, " said Mark, Harry's quasi-sentient tattoo that had been the remnant of

Bellatrix Black's Dark Mark. *"They dissstrusst you. Beacussse he dissstrussts you. I ssenssse hisss ssspirit nearby within yon dwelling. Hisss mind echoesss within all of thessse ssserpentsss. They ssspeak the truth. Hisss mind will enter you along with the ssserpent'sss venom, and he will sssee into your heart. "*

"Him? You mean Voldemort?"

Instantly, all the innumerable adders hissed loudly in agitation.

"I would advissse againsst sssaying hisss name aloud in thisss place, my Massster. Or indeed, thinking it too ssstrongly."

Harry nodded. "Okay, then" he said aloud and in English. "Let's try another approach."

The boy reached into a pocket to produce a small orb which he set down on the ground before tapping it three times with his wand. The orb instantly grew to about two feet in diameter. It was an Eye-Spy. From another pocket, he produced a small mirror which he touched to the Eye-Spy so that they could sync up. Most of the Brain Trust's Eye-Spy designs held glass memory crystals which could be removed and then attached physically to mirrors, but at his request, the group had fashioned one that could send real-time visuals to a linked mirror so long as it was nearby.

Oh, and it was also shrinkable, which apparently made the enchantment process much more complicated, if Sue Li's grumbling was anything to go by. As a result, it was generally inferior to the ones they had built for commercial use; there was a significant reduction in the Eye-Spy's speed, maneuverability, and video quality, and there was no

sound at all. But Harry thought it would work for this purpose.

With a flick of the Black Wand, the Eye-Spy rose into the air and floated slowly over the field of adders, all of whom hissed angrily at it as it passed over them. Soon, it was on the porch a few feet from the front door.

"Okay, everyone," Harry asked. "What do you see now?"

"Just your Eye-Spy thingy floating in the middle of the clearing," Regulus said. The other two Slytherins concurred.

"Good... I guess," Harry said. "Okay, Mr. Malfoy, if I told you to target a position one foot directly in front of where the Eye-Spy is facing with your strongest Unlocking Charm, would it still work even if you couldn't see the door and on a fundamental level don't even believe that the door exists?"

Lucius's eyebrows rose as he considered the question. "What an interesting theoretical conundrum! Let us put it to an experimental test!"

"Wait!" Harry interrupted. "Before you do, let me just say that... if I suddenly scream 'RUN!' at the top of my lungs, do it and don't look back. That 'certain death' that is ten feet away from us is probably capable of moving closer and fast under the right circumstances. In fact, you should probably all stay ready to Apparate just in case."

He paused in thought. "I'd appreciate it if one of you grabbed me and took me along for the ride," he added.

"We'll do our best to remember you," said Malfoy drolly. Then, he steeled himself and tried to visualize a locked door in front of the Eye-Spy. "**ABIERTO HORRIBILIS!**"

There was a flash of light that only Harry could see, along with a frighteningly loud and obviously angry susurrations from the enormous adder colony that only he could hear. But the snakes did not leave the circle, and the door slowly opened. He watched the video feed on the mirror and gestured carefully with his wand to guide the Eye-Spy through the opening.

"What the... !" Regulus exclaimed. "The Eye-Spy just disappeared!"

"No," Harry answered while his eyes remained focused on the mirror and the hazy, grainy images within it. "It just moved inside an invisible building."

The three men looked at one another in consternation, while Harry ignored them to focus on maintaining control over the Eye-Spy.

The interior of the shack was indeed bigger than its exterior but not by much. Harry estimated that there were probably three or four rooms, all in a state of extreme decay. To his surprise, however, it appeared that the item he sought was in plain view. On the far side of the main room, there was a stone fireplace. On the mantle above it sat a small golden box that appeared to be six inches on a side and four inches tall. And rather unexpectedly, sitting on top of it was... *a rubber duck*. It was bright green with a yellow bill, comically large eyes, and silver accents, but it otherwise looked like an ordinary Muggle children's bath toy.

Harry stared at the video image dully and wondered when his life started to become so strange.

"Okay," he said. "Time for a Death Eater history lesson. Just for curiosity's sake, can any of you tell me what the deal was with Erasmus Wilkes and rubber ducks?"

Regulus winced. "Harry, is there a damned rubber duck somewhere in... that place we can't see?"

"Yes. And I think it's sitting right on top of the exact thing we're here for. Unless, of course, the thing that looks like the thing we're looking for is a fake meant to divert us. We'll see, I guess. So... the rubber duck?"

It was Snape who responded. "As either Professor McGonagall or Professor Babbling might have explained to you, enchanted objects generally cannot be subject to externally applied Transfiguration effects, including Charms that mimic such Transfiguration. Runic inscription and direct Transfiguration are usually incompatible. Either the Transfiguration fails to alter the enchanted object at all, or the object is transformed but is no longer enchanted once restored to normality. The former outcome is far more likely than the latter, as only a Transfiguration master can alter the form of an enchanted item. However, even then, the Transfiguration will still disrupt the object's runic matrices. There are a few exceptions where a vulnerability to a particular type of transformation is woven into the enchantments. For example, magical trunks nowadays can usually be subjected to Shrinking Charms because that characteristic is now commonly incorporated into their manufacture. But such is rare."

Harry blinked slowly. "Uh-huh. And that is relevant to my question about rubber duckies because...?"

"Because Wilkes, being a mad genius," Lucius continued, "found a way around that limitation. He had a technique whereby enchanted items-regardless of the nature of their enchantments, their composition, or their size-could be Transfigured into another form that would fit easily into a

pocket and then restored to their true shape instantly and with no loss of functionality."

"Okay. I'm *still* not hearing any explanation about the ducks."

"And you likely won't get one, Harry," Regulus said ruefully. "The secret died with Wilkes, so no one knows whether he always transfigured magic items into rubber ducks because of some quirk in his technique that made that the only viable form or whether he chose to always use rubber ducks because he was *a barking loon* and thought killing people with rubber ducks was funny. But regardless, if one of his ducks is in there, then it will likely transform spontaneously into some other form, and probably a deadly one, if triggered."

Harry shook his head at the absurdity. "*Rubber ducks! Honestly!*"

"So how do I avoid triggering it?" he asked aloud.

"Bugger if any of us know, Harry," Reg said. "We can't see the damned thing if it exists. We can only talk about it by hanging on to the idea that this is just a hypothetical question. It could be anything inside the duck. And it could be anything that triggers it into action."

"True," said Lucius thoughtfully. "But if it was left to guard something, Occam's Razor tells us it will probably be triggered by proximity. And it will probably *not* be something so destructive that it damages whatever it is protecting."

"That's *still* not how Occam's Razor works," Severus snapped irritably. In front of him, Harry frowned into the mirror before shrugging.

"Oh well, nothing ventured..." he said before gesturing with his wand to cause the Eye-Spy to move closer to the fireplace.

When it got within about five feet, the duck trembled slightly. And then, to Harry's surprise, the duck was suddenly gone, and in its place stood a short doll-like figure. It stood two-feet tall and greatly resembled the toy nutcracker soldier from the Nutcracker Ballet. Petunia had a similar one that she put up every year as a Christmas decoration, although it didn't look nearly as angry and menacing as the one Harry could now see in the mirror. Almost instantly, the nutcracker's eyes began to glow before its wooden mouth dropped down suddenly.

"Hit the deck!" Harry yelled before dropping to the ground. His three companions did the same after a second of hesitation but just in the nick of time. There was a deafening KRAK-OWW, and the Eye-Spy was blasted back out of the shack to fly over the four wizards before crashing into a tree branch and falling to the ground in pieces. In response, several hundred adders all hissed "Ki-ki-ki!" in unison. Even though he was a Parselmouth, Harry still found it incredibly creepy.

The group stayed down for a few seconds before Lucius was the first to rise. "Odd," he quipped sarcastically. "I don't see any storm clouds overhead."

Malfoy quickly made his way over to the remains of the Eye-Spy which were blackened and in several chunks. He cast a quick spell, and his eyes widened in surprise.

"Fulminata Maxima," he announced. "I would not have thought it possible to incorporate such a destructive spell into any enchanted object, let alone one that could be

transformed by the Toymaker's ridiculous duck fetish. Truly, this is a day for unwelcome surprises."

Harry sighed loudly. "Okay, I'm out of ideas." He paused. "Well, almost. I've got one minor idea left."

With that, the boy walked up close to the edge of the snake colony before pointing his wand at the ground and casting the Color-Changing Charm. Instantly, there was a bright orange spot on the ground. Harry then proceeded to walk slowly around the perimeter of the shack, periodically recasting the spell as he went. The snakes hissed angrily but made no move to attack. By the time he had completed his trek, there was a bright orange circle completely surrounding the Gaunt Shack.

"Can one of you do something to this to make it permanent?" he asked the others. "Or at least longer lasting? Or is the circle I just drew invisible to you all as well?"

"No, Harry," Lucius said as he targeted the circle for a spell. "*That*, at least, I can see. And it will now last for a week or so."

"Well, surely to Merlin, we can figure out something by then," Harry said. "And it gives you three a mental image of this place that's not blocked by the Fidelius. That way, we can Apparate back here next time without having to ride Muggle buses."

"Next time?" Snape asked. "We are giving up?"

Harry looked to his mentor in frustration. "Well, what else can we do?! None of you can perceive... whatever's in the circle, let alone target it with a spell! And I only brought the one Eye-Spy!"

He turned back to the shack and glared angrily at it and at the sea of adders who seemed to collectively mock his efforts.

"I say we go home, brainstorm for a bit, and come back in a week. If nothing else, I can get Hermione to make some more Eye-Spies. And maybe have Fred and George pack some high explosives into them."

Meanwhile, Reg stepped forward and studied the circle as if willing himself to see what was hidden within.

"Do you think that would work?" he asked. "Just blowing it up, I mean?"

"The Horcrux?" Lucius said. "Assuredly not. They are incredibly resistant to damage. Even my strongest Bombarda Maxima would do nothing."

Then, he frowned. "We are agreed that it is a Horcrux sitting inside that circle? Odd that we can say the word so freely given the contortions we went through just to get here."

"The word '*Horcrux*' is not actually used in the Secret," Harry said tiredly. "We can talk about that because we knew about... You-Know-Who's Horcruxes in general before I learned the Secret. And I wasn't expecting explosives to destroy it. But I thought they might destroy the structure it's in enough to cause the Fidelius itself to collapse, which can happen when an important part of the Secret ceases to be true."

Regulus turned back to the group.

"Well, if all we're talking about is destroying what's inside the circumference of that circle, we don't need to leave at all, do we? Surely the four of us have the firepower for that!"

Harry shook his head. "It's too risky, I think. I'm worried that the... that the *defenses* that are currently contained inside the circle might be able to spread outside to attack us if we just Bombarda the... the... oh, hell, the thing I can't describe!"

Regulus turned back around and smiled. "What if we used something a wee bit more destructive than a Bombarda?"

The boy's eyes lit up. "Oh, no! No, no, no! Bad Reg!"

"Oh, this sounds exciting," Lucius drawled sarcastically. "What madness is Regulus contemplating?"

"Unless I miss my guess," Snape hissed, "I believe our lunatic friend is considering the deployment of Fiendfyre on the circle and whatever lies within it!"

Regulus grinned. "Well, I *am* rather good at Fiendfyre."

"I don't think I have ever heard seven words that have filled me with more dread," Lucius replied.

"Look!" Reg snapped. "I understand the need for caution. But except for Harry, we're all flying blind. I am opposed to simply leaving now because we can't exclude the possibility that the protections for this place include *letting the Dark Lord know someone's been here* ! We're here now, and I don't know about you lot, but the Cup Horcrux taught me a lesson about the dangers of hesitating where one of these damned things is concerned. Now, Lucius, will Fiendfyre destroy it or not?"

After a moment of hesitation, Malfoy nodded. "Almost certainly."

"Good, so everyone can just stand back and let me end this! If something goes horribly wrong, you can nag me about it later in the afterlife!"

With that, Regulus turned back to the seemingly empty circle and took a moment to center himself before drawing forth his most painful memories, leading up to his moment of greatest anger and despair. Then, he whirled his wand in a circle over his head before pointing it at the center of the clearing.

"FIENDFYRE! "

And hell came to Little Hangleton.

All four wizards could see as a portal to some other place opened to admit the raging green hellfire. It exploded outward from its point of origin, and the sound of mad laughter filled the air. But Regulus tightened his grip on his wand, and the flames came no further than the edge of the circle, though the grass just outside it blackened and died. The flames also rose upwards, but the wizard's will prevented it from going too high. The Fiendfyre stabilized into a perfect hemisphere in the center of the clearing, one full of swirling green flames, within which leering, inhuman faces seemed to appear and disappear.

Only Harry could see that the Gaunt Shack was incinerated almost instantly, and only he could hear the sound of scores of serpents hissing in terror before being vaporized by the deadly flames.

But *all* of them heard and saw what came next, an animalistic roar from inside the flaming dome, followed by the dome itself rising up and expanding into a firestorm nearly fifty feet high despite Reg's best efforts to contain it. Then, all the disturbing images that seemed to float in the

Fiendfyre merged into one singular face, gigantic and terrifying, carved from the hellish flames.

It was the face of Voldemort.

"It's... *him*," Lucius whispered wide-eyed while unconsciously clutching the tattoo on his left forearm. Beside him, Snape fought to suppress his own shock at the Dark Lord made manifest in this nightmarish form.

"Regulus!" He yelled. "Enough! End your spell!"

"Brilliant idea, Snape!" Regulus called back. By now, he was holding his wand in both hands, but it was now shaking violently. "Only it's not working!"

"I thought you said you could control this!" Lucius bellowed.

"Usually, I can! But not when there's someone else who's fighting against me! And especially not when it's the bloody Dark Lord himself!"

"How can it be Vold... I mean, You-Know-Who?!" Harry called out. "If the Fiendfyre destroyed the Horcrux, how can any of his soul be left to do this?! To do *anything* ?!"

"I don't know! But I can't hold him much longer! Severus, take Harry and Apparate out of here!"

"We're not leaving you!" Harry said as he ran up to stand beside Regulus, an image of his god-uncle lying dead in a forest in an aborted timeline rushing through his head. Lucius and Snape followed the boy forward.

"Severus will Apparate the boy, Regulus, and I will Apparate you!"

"NO!" Regulus yelled with authority. "If I leave now, the Fiendfyre will run wild! There are two towns near here just full of Muggles that will be incinerated before it burns itself out! I have to keep it contained!"

Suddenly, an idea fought its way to the forefront of Harry's mind. "When you summoned Fiendfyre at Hogwarts, you said the Aurors brought it down. How did they do it?"

Regulus winced in pain from his exertions as sweat poured from his forehead. "There is a spell from the Auror training manual that can be used to disrupt Fiendfyre, but it takes several minutes to do so safely and requires at least four Aurors to cast!"

"Is that the only way?"

Reg closed his eyes in concentration but then opened them wide. "No! There *is* another way! Insanely risky but it's our only chance. If someone else casts Fiendfyre *inside* a Fiendfyre inferno that's already been summoned and overcomes the will of the wizard controlling it, the two spells will cancel each other out!

"Would that work here?! Against Voldemort?!"

The man hesitated. "Possibly... Yes! Lucius! Severus! Quickly! Cast Fiendfyre inside of mine. Our minds should sync up and be enough to overpower the Horcrux's control!"

"Regulus!" Snape said while mentally preparing himself to grab Harry and Apparate out with him despite the boy's objections. "I have *never* been able to cast *Fiendfyre* !"

"Nor I!" Lucius said.

"Is it *that* hard?!" Harry asked in surprise. He'd assumed that if Regulus could cast the spell, surely two connoisseurs of dark magic like Snape and Malfoy could as well. Meanwhile, all four of them could only stare up at the gigantic visage that loomed over them as it strained against Regulus's control. Voldemort's spectral face contorted as if he were screaming in a mad fury.

Malfoy barked out a laugh. "In somatic and verbal terms, it's the easiest dark spell ever invented. Just whirl your wand overhead in a circle and then point it at the target while screaming '*Fiendfyre!*' The problem is with the esoteric requirement which I, thankfully, never had call to master."

"What is the esoteric requirement?!"

Harry had to yell now to be heard over the roaring flames. There was a sudden horrifying rush of heat, and the daemonic face inside the circle grew larger and then pushed towards them, but Regulus held his control. It was Snape who answered the boy's question.

"You must focus your mind on a memory of hating someone so much that you would die to ensure their destruction! So much, in fact, that you would see everyone left that you still cared about die along with you! I... Even at my lowest, I was never so lost that I would sacrifice... sacrifice those few I had left just to destroy an enemy."

Harry's eyes widened, as he turned back to the column of Fiendfyre. And he remembered. No, he *chose* to remember!

"And so, as Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter, I, Iacomus Charlus Potter..."

"Don't. You. Dare!"

"... do hereby invoke Sanctum Ultimo and declare you Outcast... Hadrian Remus No-Name!"

"My sense of self-preservation was always too great to allow me to cast the spell," Lucius yelled, oblivious to the boy's sudden inner turmoil. "Just as that sense of self-preservation demands that we leave this instant!"

"He's right, Harry!" Regulus exclaimed as sweat poured down his forehead. "Take Snape's arm and get the hell out of here."

"No!" said Harry in a cold voice. It was not a yell or cry, yet somehow his denial made itself heard over the roaring flames.

Snape hesitated, while Lucius looked at the boy in sudden surprise. Harry moved forward to stand even with Regulus but about five feet to the side. He never took his eyes off Voldemort's screaming face, but it was someone else's face he drew forth from deep within his Memory Palace with all the precision and clarity his Occlumency allowed. With a flick of his wrist, the Black Wand dropped into Harry's hand, and for once, he did not feel disdain from the wand but rather *anticipation*.

"I will never stop hating you for what you've done to me today, James Potter. Never. I will hate you from beyond the grave. "

From somewhere deep in the recesses of his mind, Harry felt the thing he called "Bob" growl and snap in impotent rage. Harry whirled the Black Wand in a circle over his head before pointing it straight into the image of Voldemort's face.

"FIENDFYRE! "

The Fiendfyre Voldemort screamed as a second portal opened within the first and a second inferno poured forth. The face stretched and distorted before melting back into the flames. After a few seconds, all trace of the Dark Lord was gone. But what remained was still terrifying to all who could see it: a great miasma of howling green fire within which dire animal shapes-some kind of wolf-like predator and an enormous serpent-came into existence and began snapping at one another, like daemonic antitheses of Reg and Harry's Patronuses. Then, each of the animals threw back its head and breathed matching goutts of green fire into the sky.

It took all of Harry's willpower to maintain his own control over the flames he'd summoned, and to his surprise, he could *feel* Regulus's mind in sync with his own. No, not his mind. He could feel Regulus's *soul* and see the terrible gaping wound in the heart of it.

"I knew you'd come... pretty... boy. I... knew you'd... save... our son. "

And while he stood side by side with Regulus Black and shared with him the moment when each of them learned how to hate completely and without any restraint, Harry Black thought for just a moment about how wonderful it would be to simply let the whole world burn. The Black Wand sang in his hand, while deep down, Bob exulted in the raging hatred that Harry had allowed back into his heart. But then...

"Harry ."

The voice was soft and full of such compassion for him that it was almost painful. It was Regulus.

"You've done it. Now just let go of your anger. Allow it to drain out of you like poison drawn from a wound. It does not control you. You control yourself. "

Regulus continued to talk mentally to Harry, guiding him through the process of bringing the Fiendfyre-and himself-under control. It took several minutes, but finally the last of the hellish flames dissipated, leaving nothing but a perfect circle of blackened smoldering earth. Suddenly exhausted, Harry dropped to his knees. Snape rushed over to him, medicinal potions already in his hands.

"How in Merlin's name is that spell not Unforgiveable ?" the boy gasped in a daze.

Behind Snape, Lucius answered with a blandness that concealed the shock and concern he felt at witnessing the boy's power.

"Arguably, it should be, as its esoteric component is just as destructive and anti-social as that of the Killing Curse. I believe it is tolerated mainly because it does have a few beneficial uses. There are some Class XXXXX creatures who can only be harmed by Fiendfyre. And as we've seen, it is the most effective tool for safely destroying powerful cursed objects."

Harry gave him a look, and Malfoy chuckled. "Well, for some definitions of '*safely* .' It's also the closest thing to a magical shield against the Killing Curse."

"Really?" the boy asked in surprise.

"Eh, it's not much of a shield. It doesn't stop the Avada Kedavra, but it can bend it slightly, diverting its trajectory by about two degrees to the right from the point the curse strikes the hellfire. Not much, but when nothing else

fashioned from magic can even slow the Killing Curse in the slightest, it's an intriguing characteristic. Besides, the psychological defense it provides is arguably better. If you've summoned Fiendfyre and your opponent kills you, the Fiendfyre will run wild, destroying your assailant as revenge. Along with everything within a few miles, of course. That's why it's banned during World Class duels."

"Honestly, Lucius," Regulus said while stretching his back. "I don't care about any of your Dark Arts trivia in the slightest. All that matters now is that Fiendfyre has the power to-*OH FOR FUCK'S SAKE !*"

Everyone else turned towards Regulus and then followed the direction of his shocked gaze. They were just as astonished. In the center of the circle, buried halfway into the cursed blackened earth, *was a golden box completely unharmed by the fires of Hell itself !*

After a long, shocked silence, Harry rose unsteadily to his feet and pointed the Black Wand towards the very object the Toymaker had sent him to recover. "**ACCIO GOLDEN BOX!**" The box didn't move.

"Were you seriously expecting that to work?" Lucius chided.

Harry shrugged. "Couldn't hurt to check," he said.

Regulus looked across the blasted clearing. "And can I assume that it would be horrifically bad to just walk across this blackened earth to pick it up?"

"Probably fatal," Severus said. "Absent anti-curse paraphernalia we don't have or protective Charms I doubt even Lucius knows, the immediate aftereffects of Fiendfyre are highly toxic. It seems we must leave for a week after all. It will take at least that long for the residual curse-fire to

dissipate enough for us to cross it, although long term exposure will likely be toxic for years to come."

Harry shook his head. "No, we won't need to leave, Professor. We'll just get someone to bring the box to us."

"Who...?" Snape began, but Harry put up a hand while staring intently at the clearing. After a few seconds, a small gout of flame shot up from the ground, followed by a short wriggling form that was still on fire yet unharmed by it. Within seconds, the form had grown into a large crimson serpent almost four feet long. It was followed by a flurry of similar flames erupting from elsewhere in the cursed area, each of which was followed by the emergence of a flaming snake.

"Ashwinders!" Harry said triumphantly. "Big ones too! They're born from the residue of magical flames. And apparently, Fiendfyre makes them larger than normal."

He turned back to Snape. "As I recall, Sir, you did once tell me to undertake a study of herpetology."

The boy took a step forward and then hissed loudly. The dozen or so Ashwinders within the circle turned to look at him before hissing in response and then slithering over to the golden box. Working in tandem, they dislodged it from the earth into which it had partially sunk. Then, they took turns nudging it over towards the quartet. Meanwhile, Lucius was busy counting under his breath.

"Lucius, what *are* you doing?" Regulus asked.

"I'm counting Ashwinders," he said distractedly. "I see at least twelve, all of them born of Fiendfyre. They will likely each lay a clutch of ten to twelve eggs in the next hour before they dissipate. That's between 120 and 144

ashwinder eggs of the *highest* quality, worth 10 galleons per egg *at least!* At least 1,200 galleons just waiting to be picked up!"

Regulus stared at his fellow Slytherin. "You're a *millionaire* ! Why the hell are you so excited over a mere 1,200 galleons?!"

Lucius sniffed disdainfully. "I'm a *multi-* millionaire. And I did not achieve that by ignoring opportunities for profit when they literally explode out of the ground in front of me!"

While the other two men were bickering, Snape moved closer to Harry and spoke softly.

"So... Mr. Black. Would you like to share with me what memory you have that allows you to summon Fiendfyre?"

Harry looked back up at his mentor with a polite yet firm expression. "No, Professor. Respectfully... I would not."

By that point, the Ashwinders had ferried the box over to the edge of the circle and nudged it over. Harry reached to pick it up, but all three adults yelled "NO!" simultaneously. He froze with his hand just inches from the box.

"For pity's sake, Harry!" Regulus exclaimed. "That thing just came out of a Fiendfyre conflagration! It's probably hot enough to burn your fingers clean off."

The boy looked back down at the box and his hand, which was still only inches away. His brow furrowed.

"It doesn't feel like it," he said.

"Impossible," Lucius said before moving closer. He cast a spell at the box. And then another. The second spell caused

an array of strange runes to appear floating in the air above the box. Lucius's eyes widened. He slashed his wand and the runes disappeared. Then, he cast the same spell again, with the same results. He slashed his wand again, this time almost angrily. When a third repetition gave him the same result, he lowered his wand and staggered back, his face ashen.

"What is it, Lucius?" Snape said, concerned.

Malfoy looked around at the others in visible shock before he finally spoke.

"The box... is orichalcum. Given Boruslav Lestrangle's involvement, that is not surprising, although a quantity of orichalcum that size is... extraordinary."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "That's not what disturbs you though, is it, Lord Malfoy."

It was not a question. Lucius took a deep shuddering breath.

"Commercially available orichalcum is usually rated at about 50% pure. That is, an alloy of equal parts orichalcum and some other precious metal, usually gold. If you're willing to spend a fortune, orichalcum that is 65% pure can be obtained. About sixty years ago, Nicolas Flamel produced approximately twenty grams of orichalcum that was 75% pure, and he declared that further refinement beyond that point was absolutely impossible."

All four Slytherins looked down at the box.

"So how pure is this?" Harry asked slowly.

"I don't know, Harry," the man said in a shaken voice. "The spell I used was unable to determine that. You see, it only

goes up to a purely theoretical 85%, *and the purity of this box clearly exceeds that!* "

"How much is it worth?!" Snape asked. Lucius gave a slightly hysterical laugh.

"So much that it is effectively worthless! Based on the value and scarcity of 65% orichalcum, I would guess there are literally not enough galleons in Wizarding Britain to pay for a quantity of orichalcum this large! The Goblins would *go to war* if they had the slightest *clue* that this existed!"

"Well fine then!" Regulus interrupted. "Let's get on with destroying the damnable thing and be done with it!"

"Regulus, this box survived *Fiendfyre* !" Snape noted. "I don't know if we can destroy it!"

"Hang on a minute," Harry said. "Is the box itself the Horcrux? Or is it something inside the box? I mean, Voldemort-possessed Fiendfyre aside, this thing hasn't tried to kill us. And the Toymaker said that the golden box was a treasure but there were other treasures inside, one of which could lead to Voldemort's resurrection. So maybe all we have to do is figure out how to open the thing. Then, we can destroy the Horcrux inside and, I dunno, toss the economy-wrecking orichalcum box into the sea or something."

Regulus sighed. "Severus, pretend you didn't see this."

Then, he cast a spell upon the box that Arcturus Black had taught him when he was a boy. A faint rune appeared floating in the air over the box, one that he last saw fifteen years earlier in a cave guarded by Inferi. He shuddered.

"Harry is correct. The Horcrux is inside the box but not the box itself."

"You have a spell to *detect* Horcruxes and I am only now hearing of it?!" Snape growled.

"I cannot answer your questions, Severus," Regulus said. "I'm under an oath."

Then, he looked down at Harry, who simply shrugged. "Don't look at *me* ! You're the one who put me under an Unbreakable Vow not to talk about it with anyone else back when you were still Lockhart."

The man frowned. "Oh, right! I totally forgot about that! '*ha-Ha!*' and all that. We should probably see about getting Miss Lovegood to free you from that Oath at some point."

"I don't even want to know what you're burbling about, Regulus," Lucius snapped. "Severus, I am not under any of the oaths to which Regulus is obliquely referring. I will explain to you once we're home what I can, though my own knowledge is incomplete. While I know *of* the... Horcrux Detection Charm, I don't know how to perform it."

He turned to look pointedly at Regulus. "*At some point*, I should like to cure my ignorance-of that and other... related matters-before I introduce my son to the topic."

"That shouldn't be a problem," the other man said. "We'll have to use your copy, though. Ours got, well, *poof!* "

Lucius nodded slowly before changing the subject. "In the meantime, Harry, you told us that Erasmus Wilkes suggested that you would be able to open this box with the right words, yes?"

"Um, yeah. But he wouldn't tell me what the words are. Just '*say the magic words in Parseltongue* ' and it would open."

"Well, then. You're a clever boy. Put your Slytherin brain to it."

At that, the boy paused for a moment in thought before hissing in Parseltongue at the box for about a minute and, at one point, pulling out the Black Wand to cast spells at it. The box remained unaffected. Finally, Harry gave up.

"Okay, I've tried every Unlocking Charm I know in Parseltongue. I've also tried *open, open up, open sesame*, and *Speak to me Slytherin, Greatest of the Hogwarts Four*. None of them worked."

"... *Greatest of the Hogwarts Four*?" Regulus muttered confusedly. Meanwhile, Lucius looked thoughtful.

"Hmm. Well, it *is* the Toymaker, after all. Try saying '*the magic words*' in Parseltongue."

Harry looked at him quizzically before divining his meaning. Then, he turned back to the box. "*The magic wordsss*." Still nothing.

Finally admitting defeat for the moment, Lucius reached down to carefully pick up the box. It was surprisingly lightweight. He held it gingerly for a moment, and when he was certain it wasn't about to kill him somehow, he reached his other hand into a different pocket to produce a two-foot-long piece of braided twine which he held out for the other three wizards. Each of them grabbed hold of the Portkey and braced themselves as Lucius said the activation phrase.

"UK FOOTSIE 100 3161.70. "

One brief but harrowing Portkey ride later, the quartet found themselves just outside the gates of Malfoy Manor. They

paused to reverse the various effects they'd previously used to disguise their appearance. Then, with a flick of Lucius's wand, the gates opened, and the group headed towards the house, only to freeze as an unexpected figure on a broom flew towards them at great speed, stopping effortlessly to hover in front of them just a few feet off the ground.

Harry did a double-take, as he almost didn't recognize the flyer, who'd grown at least four inches since the last time they'd seen one another. He'd also put on a decent amount of muscle, and his hair was no longer carefully styled and pomaded into submission. Instead, it was quite a bit longer and flowed freely in the breeze in what Harry thought was a surprisingly dashing manner.

"Draco," Lucius said, almost but not quite concealing his surprise. "I'd thought you and young Justin would still be at the World Cup opening. What brings you home so early?"

"Boredom," Draco said casually while taken in the figures before him, one of whom was his own father wearing *Muggle jeans* ! "In both of today's matches, the Snitch showed up early and got caught in under half an hour. Quite anticlimactic."

Draco turned his attention to his father's guests, all three of whom looked flummoxed to varying degrees at the Malfoy Heir's unexpected arrival. He pulled his right leg over the broom casually to cross his left and then smiled at their discomfort.

"So," he said in a chipper voice and with an amused grin. "What's in the box?"

Next: The Quidditch World Cup!

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading):

Behind Doors and Masks by dragonwriter24cmf has updated again after a long break. During Year 7, Neville learns the truth about Headmaster Snape and, to the surprise of them both, becomes the only person Snape can count on.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: AjithSen, Banshee, dragonsandotters, fr2020, Hunter, jaa'm, Jennifer Weasley, kean, LFGB, Mr. Cato, Mr. Z, mychakk, PrettyPinkCupcake, ProgKingHughesker, renderrruby, Rubric of Ahriman, Sakkiko, and TNT. Thanks, guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 16,195. Followers: 16,971. Favorites: 15,166. Communities: 237. Discord followers: 4095! Go Team POS!

The Quidditch World Cup (Part 1)

Chapter 8: The Quidditch World Cup (Part 1)

Shameless plug! My first original novel, *Strangers In Boston*, is now for sale, and I am presently working on the sequel. Check out my website for more information:
<https://thesinisterman.com/home/>.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Harry Black

and the Resurrection Game

Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.

Chapter 8: The Quidditch World Cup

9 August 1994

(Day 2)

While Draco had declared Day One of the Quidditch World Cup to be boring, Day Two was another matter: the first match of the day was between perennial powerhouse Germany and "the Balkan Miracle," as the sports reporters referred to the upstart Bulgarian team. As Harry sat down next to Draco in their VIP box, this was the boy's first opportunity to see Malfoy's schoolmate, the famous Viktor

Krum, in action. The young Bulgarian, still a month shy of his seventeenth birthday, had been the story of the year. Two days before a crucial Qualifying Round against Macedonia, Borka Chavdarov, the previous Seeker of the Bulgarian National Team, was arrested for getting drunk, getting *naked*, and riding a bear through the streets of Sofia, shooting fireworks from his wand (his *magical* wand, to be specific) the whole time. Scores of Muggles witnessed the whole thing, and *Chavdarov's Folly*, as the papers dubbed it, was a significant violation of the Statute of Secrecy. Chavdarov's situation and that of the Bulgarian Team were only worsened by the fact that the Bulgarian reserve Seeker tried in vain to stop Chavdarov only for the bear to get hold of him with fatal results.

Desperate, the Bulgarian coach extended an invitation to Krum, a Bulgarian national who'd been the top-rated Seeker at Durmstrang since his second year. The coach had held out hope that Krum could keep the team competitive enough for their first three games while the lawyers tried to get Chavdarov out of jail. He was as surprised as anyone when Krum caught the Snitch within fifteen minutes, not only outflying the Macedonian Seeker but also leaving him in the dirt after a flawless Wronski Feint. Krum did just as well in his second match and his third. By his fourth, no one was talking about Borka Chavdarov anymore.

Viktor Krum, the new Bulgarian national hero, would go on a nine-game winning streak as Seeker before the team finally lost a match, and the Bulgarians would only lose three of the sixteen Qualifying Rounds. Most importantly, no one *ever* beat Krum to the Snitch.

"So," asked Harry Black, "what's he like?"

"For Merlin's sake, Harry," drawled Draco Malfoy. "You make it sound like I'm dating him."

"Not my intention, I assure you." Harry hesitated. "By the way, I never had a chance to ask last night. Is it Draco or *Drake*?"

"Draco... for the time being anyway. I'm still unhappy with a name my mother picked because of the conventions of a House I'm not a part of. But on the other hand, most of the kids at Durmstrang are Eastern European, and my name sounds a lot more impressive when people pronounce it *Draaago!*"

Harry laughed. "Fair enough. So leaving aside any suggestion of romantic interest, what *is* Krum like? I mean, you did say he'd been assigned as your student mentor, whatever that is?"

"It's basically what Granger did for Crabbe and Goyle when we were First Years except, at Durmstrang, we have older students assigned to mentor and tutor new arrivals. Oh, and no money changes hands. Well, not for tutoring, anyway. Usually it's just for First Years, but since I transferred as a Third Year, I got assigned one too. And because I am awesome-and Headmaster Karkaroff owes my father a life debt-I got assigned Krum."

Then, Draco and Harry leaned forward in their seats, their conversation temporarily forgotten, as Krum performed a corkscrew turn in the air to dodge a Bludger at the last possible second. Harry was pretty sure that was the same maneuver he'd used to evade the two Bludgers during his infamous Second Year match when deranged house elves interfered with the game with nearly fatal results. Unlike his

desperation move, however, Krum made the maneuver seem deliberate and even casual.

Harry whistled while the crowd around them roared its approval. Draco smirked at him.

"Yes, I thought that would seem familiar to you. I showed Viktor a Pensieve memory of that match. He stole several of your moves, actually. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," Harry said cheerfully as he took a sip of butterbeer. "Has he done a Suicide Slam yet?"

"No, he says that's *my* signature move, and he doesn't want to horn in on it."

Harry nodded, but then he blinked before his eyes widened. "Draco? Have you done *another* Suicide Slam at Durmstrang?"

The corners of the Malfoy Heir's lips twitched. "Two, actually. Don't tell Father."

Harry snorted. "I wouldn't dream of it! So *anyway*, you still haven't told me what Krum... or *Viktor*, I suppose... is like."

Draco popped a Cockroach Cluster into his mouth and chewed deliberately while considering the question.

"He's very intelligent and a lot smarter than he looks and acts. In fact, he actively cultivates the image of an aloof and surly thick-headed peasant so that people underestimate him and don't try to engage him in conversation. He *hates* idle conversation and especially people who shriek his name and beg for autographs. He also took ten OWLs and plans to sit six NEWTs. '*Joost in case Kvidditch doesn't vurk out*' is how he put it."

Draco laughed and shook his head.

"Pfft. As though Viktor can't have his pick of Seeker spots in another year. Anyway, he's been the Prefect for House Bogatyr for the last two years. He was offered the Head Boy position but had to turn it down after Bulgaria made the Cup. Simply unbelievable on a broom. Better than Potter, I'd say. Or even you. I should be able to introduce you to him later, though I should warn you, his English is... poor."

"Does he want to go anywhere in particular?" Harry asked idly.

Draco hesitated for a second. "His family wants him to go to the Vratsa Vultures, who have been recruiting him heavily. That way he can stay close to home."

"Hmm. I notice that doesn't actually answer the question I asked," Harry said lightly.

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Merlin's Bones, I'd forgotten how annoying it was when you did that." Then, he paused thoughtfully. "By the way, you *do* know you're using Legilimency, right? I don't remember if we ever discussed that."

Harry looked at him in surprise. "I do, yes. How did *you* know about it?"

"Psychic arts are an elective at Durmstrang. Two months into my first term in the introductory class, I had an epiphany and said to myself '*Oh, that's why I decided to do a Suicide Slam!*'"

"Draco..." Harry said in the beginnings of an apology.

"Don't," the other boy interrupted. "I'm perfectly content with any personality changes you may have unwittingly made to my psyche. Just don't do it again. And don't let my father find out."

"No fear," Harry said with a shudder. "I have no desire to be fed to your father's Abraxans."

There was a brief pause in the conversation, as both boys jumped out of their seats to cheer. Bulgaria had scored yet another goal against the German Keeper, and the score was now 90-70 with Bulgaria in the lead.

"I must say, Draco," he continued as they sat back down. "You're in a surprisingly good mood today. I was worried that after last night you'd be..."

He trailed off as Draco leaned over so that others in the box could not overhear.

"I'd be what? Gibbering in terror?" he replied. "Level two Occlumens, Harry. I don't feel emotions that I don't want to feel, including shock, horror, and terror."

He smiled grimly.

"No fear indeed."

The previous evening at Malfoy Manor

Draco stood at the window of the family library watching as his father's albino peacocks strolled gracefully across the front lawn while the sun was setting over the tree line. His back was to the others in the room while he composed himself. His Psychic Arts professor had rated him a Level 2 Occlumens but just barely, and he still didn't entirely trust

himself to keep his emotions under control. Particularly in light of everything his father had just told him. In his hand was a strange wand-the Black Wand, it was apparently called-which Potter... no, *Black* had loaned him so that Lucius could swear both him *and Professor Snape* to a surprisingly stringent oath without risking the Trace.

He turned around to face the others.

"Okay, let me see if I have it all straight. House Malfoy, along with the other Ancient & Noble Houses, is part of a centuries-old conspiracy that exists to suppress knowledge of incredibly dark spells from a forbidden grimoire called the Anathema Codex... a copy of which is sitting right there."

Draco gestured towards the menacing tome sitting on the table in front of his father, a leather-bound book with faded gilt letters on the cover that spelled out those very words. He continued.

"The Dark Lord obtained a copy of that book and used a dark and forbidden spell from it to make himself immortal through the use of... sorry, I don't think I heard the word properly. Oar-Crusties?"

"Horcruxes," Lucius corrected.

"Ah, yes. Horcruxes. And you are all part of a conspiracy of House Malfoy, House Black, and House Longbottom, among others, to destroy those Horcruxes and finish the Dark Lord forever. To which end, you..."

At that point, the boy paused as if he could not quite fathom what he'd been told.

"To which end, *you broke into Azkaban and freed several Death Eaters?!"*

"Yes," Lucius replied placidly. "We did indeed. And in our defense, that part of the plan went masterfully until we made the mistake of expecting the government to demonstrate basic competence."

"Still, Father," Draco said almost reproachfully. "A jailbreak?! From Azkaban?! It sounds like something a bunch of Gryffindors would have thought of!"

"Draco!" Snape said sharply. "There is no cause to be insulting!"

The boy nodded respectfully. "My apologies, Father. That was uncalled for."

Draco turned his attention towards Regulus.

"It also turns out that Sirius Black is innocent, that Bellatrix Lestranger is innocent, and you, *Regulus Black*, are not dead after all!"

Reg smiled warmly at the boy. "How do you even know who I am?"

"Mother had a scrap book of old family photos that she would show me from time to time. As I recall, she praised you for your support for the Dark Lord, but she was also extremely jealous of how *lustrous and shiny* your hair always seemed to be, and so because of that, she wasn't overly upset when you died."

Lucius snorted. "Yes, that does sound like her."

Draco turned back to his father, and his eyes narrowed. "Is that why you sent me to Durmstrang, Father? To keep me out of the way while you were engaged in this business?"

"In part," Lucius admitted. "Though I told you once that you would have gone to Durmstrang from the start if the decision had been mine. And you *did* say you wanted a fresh start."

"Yes, well, right now, *I'm back*. You have made me swear oaths to initiate me not only into the greatest secrets of the Ancient & Noble Houses but also into... sorry, does the anti-Horcrux conspiracy have a name?"

"We ended up going with *Azkabal*," Harry said drily.

Draco gaped at him, his mouth hanging open in astonishment.

"Yeah, we know," Harry continued. "A Gryffindor came up with it, and the rest of us decided it wasn't worth the effort of fighting over."

"Fair enough, I suppose. So anyway, now that I'm a part of both these conspiracies..."

He took a step forward and exchanged a look with Lucius.

"What do you need me to do?"

Now...

"Draco," Harry said quietly. "Just between us... are you okay with all this?"

Draco shrugged. "It is what it is, Harry. At Hogwarts, I was Sorted into House Slytherin. At Durmstrang, I was Sorted into House Bogatyr, which..." He hesitated. "Well, let's just say it has a different reputation. But one that means that I will help in any way I can, at least for the next year."

Harry nodded. "By the way, how *did* you manage to be guaranteed a spot on the Durmstrang delegation to the Triwizard Tournament? The life debt owed to your father?"

"Oh, it wasn't even necessary to call on that, Harry. I'm third in my Year, English is my native tongue, and I'm probably the only person in all of Durmstrang, student or faculty, to have ever even set foot in Hogwarts."

"Well, it will be good to have you back, if only for a year. And I'm sure your father will be happy you're closer to home for a while."

"Hmm, yes... after sending me away for a year so he could keep his secrets more easily."

"Oh give him a break, Draco," Harry chided. "After all, it's not like you don't have secrets that you've been keeping from him."

Draco looked at Harry through narrowed eyes. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

Harry looked around to make sure no one was close. Then, he leaned in and whispered something in Draco's ear. Instantly, the other boy jumped away from him in surprise.

"How the hell do you know about *that* ?!" he spat.

Harry laughed. "I know everything worth knowing, Draco. That's why they let me sit in *the Big Chair* ."

Draco started to respond, but his next words were drowned out by the roar of the crowd, and seconds later, both boys had forgotten their whispered conversation. They were too busy screaming their excited approval.

Viktor Krum had caught the Snitch.

There was little chance that the second preliminary match that day could have ever equaled the thrills of Bulgaria's victory that morning, but it was nevertheless an exciting competition. The scrappy Australian team overpowered the Americans by two goals despite losing the Snitch. Regulus was simultaneously thrilled and frustrated. While he supported his adopted homeland's team wholeheartedly, his Archie Goodwin identity was thought to be American, and it wouldn't do to be too publicly demonstrative over Australia's victory. He made up for it upon his return to Blackstone later that night, where he got drunk enough to serenade the whole household with a traditional Australian folk song called "Beer Beer Beautiful Beer!"

On Day 3 of the Cup, poor Regulus was too hungover to accompany Harry, Neville and Theo to the arena, and so a disapproving Augusta Longbottom went in his place, while Sirius (who wanted desperately to attend the Cup but could neither Portkey nor Apparate safely) harangued his "little brother" for his irresponsibility. Regent Longbottom was decidedly not a fan of Quidditch, but she was relatively patriotic, and all four of the national teams hailing from the British Isles were scheduled to compete on Days 3 and 4. And so, the dowager sat in a chair behind three loudly screaming boys and politely clapped each goal before returning to her knitting. Not that there was too much to clap about. While Ireland won handily against Peru, Luxembourg beat Scotland with relative ease.

The next day was even worse for British fans. First, Uganda took out Wales in a surprisingly competitive game. Then, the English took the field after lunch and proceeded to suffer the most humiliating loss they'd seen in Cup play in centuries: 390-10 against *Transylvania* !

12 August 1994

Malfoy Manor

After four days of preliminary competition, the Cup took a break from tournament play. Friday was given over to an exhibition game featuring the Chudley Cannons and the Jamaica Jarveys. As it happened, Chudley was among several UK Quidditch teams guaranteed the chance to compete in exhibition during any World Cup held in the British Isles. This was due to ill-considered provisions negotiated during the 17th century when the former European Cup was opened up to other nations, and back then, Chudley was considered one of the top professional Quidditch teams in the world. Now, 300 years later, the Cup organizers struggled to find someone to compete against the hapless Cannons on their level, eventually sending an invitation to a very surprised group of amateur Quidditch enthusiasts from Jamaica who didn't even have team uniforms at the time and who picked the name Jarveys at the last minute solely for the alliteration.

They beat the Cannons 190 to 30.

Neither Harry nor any other member of the Azkabal was on hand to see yet another Chudley fiasco, as they had far more important matters to discuss. Though most of the Azkabal had visited Malfoy Manor at one point or another over the last year, this was the first time for Hermione and Amy, who both came through the Floo along with Harry. Once she'd gotten her bearings, Hermione was surprised to spot Draco on the other side of the room talking to Neville.

"Is that Draco?!" she asked. "When did he...?"

"Get so cute?" Amy asked mischievously. "I know, right! Between him and Viktor Krum, Durmstrang must be doing *something* right!"

Hermione blushed slightly and coughed. "I was *going* to say '*When did he join our illegal conspiracy?*'"

"Last Monday," Harry supplied while giving Amy a stern 'big brother' look that she ignored.

"But you do agree that he's gotten hot since we last saw him, right?" she inquired.

"Well... um... that is..." Hermione stammered.

"Very articulate, Hermione," Harry said sarcastically. "I notice that neither of you have been gushing over my '*hotness*.' Should I be offended or relieved?"

"Oh, Harry," Amy sighed. "You're family, so I could never consider you hot. I'm not one of *those* Purebloods, after all." Then, she turned to the other girl. "What about you, Hermione? Do you think Harry is as hot as Draco? And Neville, I suppose, since he's filled out nicely too?"

"Amy!" Hermione hissed.

"Stop instigating, Cousin Amy," Harry said firmly. "We're here on business. You can wait until you get back to Hogwarts to compare the relative sexiness of all your male friends."

"Why Cousin Harry!" Amy said in mock surprise. "However did you know what the Slytherin girls spend nearly every night doing up in our dorm rooms?"

Soon after, the entire group had adjourned to a conference room where Lucius's two remaining house elves waited. Prixie treated everyone to tea and sandwiches while Lemmy passed out copies of the documents Lucius had obtained. Since his return from Little Hangleton, Lucius had managed to secure a DMLE report regarding the arrest and incarceration of both Marvolo and Morfin Gaunt sometime in 1925 or 1926, and he invited his fellow conspirators to Malfoy Manor for review and discussion. As the group read through copies of the fifty-year-old DMLE report Lucius provided, Regulus asked about his lack of precision as to the date.

"Water damage from a burst pipe in 1961," he replied by way of explanation. "Damage which no one noticed in time to repair the files because they were kept in a seldom-used archive for cases that had been closed for over forty years. That is why I was unable to find out what happened to the Gaunts before now."

"That sounds oddly suspicious," Harry said.

"We are Slytherins, Harry. We find everything suspicious. The files may have been occluded by the Dark Lord or one of his agents as part of his persistent attempts to conceal his own origins. Or they might have been hidden from us as a side effect of the Fidelius that covered the Gaunt property until last Monday. Or it may simply be a coincidence. We have no way of knowing. Now, if I may continue?"

According to what information Lucius was able to recover from the damaged and incomplete files, Morfin Gaunt magically assaulted Tom Riddle Jr. (Voldemort's future father) at the Little Hangleton May Day Festival before cursing a number of other Muggles in public. Because of Little Hangleton's isolation, it took nearly three weeks for

news of the incident to reach the Ministry, at which point an investigator named Bob Ogden was sent to investigate. Ogden visited the Gaunts at their home, but the actual incident report which would have included the Gaunts' physical address was missing or destroyed, which is why Lucius had been unable to track the Gaunts down previously. From what could be pieced together, however, both Gaunts attempted to curse Ogden, and he withdrew from the scene and returned with hit wizards who promptly arrested both father and son. Marvolo did six months in Azkaban for assaulting a Ministry official. His son Morfin got three years for felony Muggle baiting for the May Day incident.

"After his release, Marvolo drops out of the picture completely," Lucius concluded. "There are no more Ministry records about him."

With a nervous cough, Hermione raised her hand as if back in class.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" he asked in bemusement.

"Well, I imagine it was probably because he died not long after his release," she said. "After I couldn't find out anything more than the information which I gave to Harry last Saturday, it occurred to me that I hadn't looked into *Great Hangleton*. So I called the library there and asked. It turned out that they sort of inherited all the public records from Little Hangleton back in the 1950s. They also put me in touch with the Hangleton Area Historical Society. From what I've learned, Marvolo Gaunt was found dead in his home on 15 December 1926. The Muggle authorities said it was natural causes. He was in his eighties at the time and after six months in Azkaban, he was probably incapable of looking after himself, so I saw no reason to think his death

might have been suspicious... but well, I'm a Gryffindor, so that sort of thing just wouldn't occur to me, I suppose. Anyway, he's buried in a cemetery just outside Little Hangleton."

"Probably the cemetery we walked past on our way from the Riddle house to the Gaunt shack," Regulus said. "I wish we'd known. We could have stopped by and paid our respects to the old nutter."

"I'll Apparate back over there tomorrow and find out exactly where he's buried," Lucius said. "Just to make sure it's actually him buried there and that he didn't just fake his own death. Because I'm a *Slytherin*, and that sort of thing *does* occur to me."

Then, Lucius frowned. "By the way, our conspiracy is missing some members. Where are Sirius and the Tonkses?"

"At the Ministry," Regulus said. "Nymphadora's being sworn in today, and Sirius decided to attend with Andi and Ted."

"Who's being sworn in?" Draco asked. "And into what?"

So far, the younger Malfoy had only met a few members of the group. In fact, he'd been surprised to find it included Neville and shocked to see it included Hermione... and that his father was completely at ease with the first Muggleborn to enter Malfoy Manor in centuries, if ever.

"Nymphadora Tonks is a Black cousin and an Auror trainee," Harry explained. "While her training period was interrupted last year due to... well, a lot of nonsense involving Azkaban escapees, she's since completed training and is being sworn in as a Junior Auror today."

"Which also means that she and the other Tonkses will be playing less of a role in our activities," Regulus added. "As an Auror, she'll be under certain oaths which might obligate her to tell her superiors about anything illegal she observes in the future. So going forward, we'll be giving her what I believe the Muggles refer to as '*plausible deniability*.'"

Lucius laughed. "*Plausible deniability*. I shall have to remember that term. Though I am, of course, quite familiar with the *concept*."

At that moment in Auror Headquarters...

There was a smattering of applause as Chief Auror Amelia Bones stepped forward to hand *Junior Auror* Nymphadora Tonks an official badge and shake her hand. The two turned slightly to face the photographer from the Daily Prophet. She was the last of the Aurors to be sworn in today, and while she was pleased to wear the Auror's badge, Tonks was also more than a little insecure about her worthiness to do so. After all, *technically*, she had only completed about eighteen months of the normal three-year training program before being put on administrative leave. As a Metamorphmagus and also a relative of most of the Azkaban escapees, she'd been under suspicion of involvement in the previous year's infamous jailbreak. Of course, she *had* been involved in the jailbreak, but only after the fact. Luckily, the oath she'd just sworn was prospective and would not punish her for any criminal activities she might have been involved with in the past.

"*Come to think of it,*" she thought to herself, "*if Alastor Moody is right, it probably wouldn't punish me for anything I do in the future either. According to him, the British Auror's*

Oath has loopholes you can fly a Hippogriff through, which is why so many of them went bad during the last war."

The fact remained, however, that she had only completed a year and a half of training as Moody's apprentice before being put on leave, and despite her best efforts she still felt that some of her skills had atrophied. And yet, she was still better off than the other three trainees who had sworn their oaths just before her and were now her fellow Junior Aurors. None of them had received more than a single year of training, but in their case it was the result of an accelerated training schedule caused by a desperate manpower shortage. Between the Hogsmeade attack and the escape of Peter Pettigrew and Augustus Rookwood, the Auror Corps had lost two of its three Senior Aurors and most of the last trainee class. It was a sobering reminder of just how dangerous her new job was going to be.

Across the room, Junior Auror Emily Rossum, who had sworn her own oath just moments earlier, had received congratulatory handshakes from Senior Aurors Thicknesse, Savage, and Dawlish. The latter two had been sworn into their new roles as part of the day's ceremony. Once the trio had moved on to the other Junior Aurors, Emily stepped over to yet another person who had been sworn in that morning.

"So," said Auror Trainee Marcus Flint, "I'm guessing it would be wildly inappropriate to kiss a superior officer in front of everyone?"

"*Wildly* inappropriate," she said with a smirk before reaching up to peck him on the cheek anyway. He laughed.

"Dinner later?" he leaned in to whisper. "And then, maybe we celebrate back at your place?"

"Dinner, yes. But no on the celebration, Marcus. Remember, we *both* have to be up early tomorrow to work security for the Cup."

"Alright, alright," he grumbled. "But once this bloody Cup is over, you and me are gonna take a few days off to ourselves, okay?"

She chuckled. "We'll see, though I'm *amazed* at you of all people being eager for the Quidditch World Cup to be over with so quickly. But I should warn you-I remember *my* first week as a trainee. I was too sore to get out of bed!"

Flint pretended to think for a moment. "I think I can work with that," he said with a smirk.

Meanwhile, Sirius had made his way over to Amelia. "Chief Auror, a pleasure to see you again. It's been a long time."

"Lord Black," she said professionally. "I was surprised to see you here at first. I had forgotten about your connection to Auror Tonks. I'm pleased to see you have welcomed her back into the fold. She'll go far with the backing of an Ancient and Noble House."

Sirius laughed. "Oh, I think she'll go far whether she has my backing or not. I've even offered to let her officially change her name to Black if she thinks it will open more doors than it might slam shut." He chuckled. "I am... aware of my family's controversial reputation."

Then, Sirius spoke again but more carefully. "While I have your ear, Chief Auror... has there been any word on Peter Pettigrew?"

"Lord Black, I understand your personal interest in the Pettigrew case, but I cannot share any details..."

"Chief Auror," Sirius said crisply. "I'm not asking for details. Just whether there's been *any word*. For all we know, Pettigrew and Rookwood are searching for You-Know-Who even as we speak, assuming they haven't already found him."

Her eyes narrowed. "The official position of the British Ministry of Magic has been that You-Know-Who has been dead since 1981, Lord Black."

Sirius lifted his chin. "I am well aware of the Ministry's *official position*, Chief Auror. And also why the Ministry *took* that position in the first place."

Amelia took a deep breath and then exhaled. "I am sorry, Lord Black, but I simply have nothing more I can share with you at this time."

He nodded slowly. "I quite understand. Thank you for addressing my concerns."

With that, Sirius turned and walked away from the Chief Auror without another word.

After shaking hands with all the other well-wishers and fellow Aurors, Tonks finally made her way over to her parents.

"Congratulations, Dora," Ted said as he leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek and give her a hug. "We're both so very proud of you."

"Indeed, Nymphadora," said Andromeda. "You have brought much honor to our family."

The young woman's eyes flashed in annoyance, and she looked around quickly to see if anyone else was close enough to hear. "I have asked you for years not to call me that. If you won't respect my wishes in general, you could at least do so today of all days."

Andromeda laughed and shook her head. "I'm sorry, darling. But I couldn't resist calling you that one last time."

Her daughter blinked. "What?"

Andi reached into her handbag and pulled out an envelope. "A gift from me and Ted to you. Something you've asked for and, if you still want it, have earned."

Tonks took the envelope from her mother and opened it. Inside were some legal documents. At the top of the first page was written "*Notice of Change of Name* ." It was signed by Andromeda, Ted, and Sirius, with two blanks left empty: one for Nymphadora Tonks's own signature and one for the signature of her *new* name.

Normally, legally changing the name of a witch or wizard was surprisingly difficult due to institutional beliefs about Nomenography and the importance of birth names. But there were exceptions. In this instance, it turned out that the new Lord Black could adopt back into the family the child of any former Black who'd been cast out. And in the process, the newly reinstated Black could, as part of the quasi-adoption, be given a new first name without having to jump through the customary legal hoops. If she executed this form, she could finally change her hated name of Nymphadora to anything she wanted.

The price, however, was that she would have to exchange the surname Tonks for Black.

"Well, dear?" Andromeda said while Ted stood beside her, smiling indulgently. "Who do you wish to become?"

Elsewhere within the Ministry

"Knock, knock!" said Ludo Bagman as he pushed his way into the already cramped Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office. In addition to three desks and a half-dozen battered filing cabinets stuffed into what had previously been a large storage closet, the office was now also home to a large cardboard box with the words "Magical Tent" stenciled on the side and which was partially blocking the door.

"Ah, Ludo, old bean!" Arthur said merrily. "What brings you to our humble offices?"

The Director of the Department of Magical Games and Sports paused to look around. "Heh, humble indeed! And Merlin, is it always this hot in here?!"

"Why, Director Bagman!" said Perkins sarcastically. "Whatever do you mean?"

At present, Perkins had an enchanted oscillating fan on either side of him floating in mid-air, neither of which prevented him from being drenched with sweat. Arthur and James were equally affected despite the regular use of Cooling Charms.

"The building's main boiler room is just on the other side of that wall," James said. "Which apparently isn't insulated at all. We could Transfigure the wall so it would block out the

heat, but we need DMLE approval to do so and, for some reason, we can't get the paperwork approved."

He gave a sour expression. "Funny that."

"Now, James," Arthur said good-naturedly. "These things just take a little time."

"*Or...* sometimes you just need to cultivate the right friendships," Bagman said easily. "Which brings me to why I'm here, Arthur. A few months back, you helped my brother Otto out of a jam, and I'm here to return the favor."

Arthur demurred. "Now Ludo, that's not necessary! That was just part of our job!"

He was referring to an incident several months earlier in which Otto Bagman's attempt to enchant a Muggle gas-powered lawnmower to operate itself went rather impressively wrong. He apparently managed to give the thing *a taste for blood* which led to two dead squirrels, a severely injured poodle, and the temporary loss of three of Otto's fingers. Luckily, Otto lived in a wizarding community and so no Muggles were on hand to see the mad mower in action, let alone be menaced by it. But it nevertheless resulted in a call to the DMLE and eventually to the MMA office. Arthur swiftly neutralized the feral machine and then showed Otto how to correct the defects which had caused its dangerous behavior before letting him off with a warning.

"Well, I don't have to tell you, Arthur, that you boys down here in the MMA Office aren't paid nearly what you deserve!" Ludo said somewhat pompously. "Now, as Head of the DMGS, I can't do anything about these deplorable working conditions, but by Merlin! I can at least get you all decent tickets to the Cup Final. What do you say?"

"Ludo," Arthur said shaking his head. "I'm very grateful, but we already have tickets."

"Tickets to the *Ministry* box, Arthur," Bagman corrected. "I'm going to upgrade you all to the VIP box! You'll be sitting in the same section as Fudge, Crouch, and all the foreign dignitaries! Best seats in the whole arena!"

James's eyes lit up, but then he deflated. "Unfortunately, Ludo, I won't be able to attend. The DMLE will be running a skeleton crew here, and I drew the short straw. I'll just be limited to listening in on the Wizarding Wireless."

"Oh, that's a pity," Bagman said. Then, his eyes lit up. "Say! Isn't your son, Jim, good friends with Arthur's youngest boy?"

"Ron?" Arthur said. "Oh yes, they've been best of friends ever since they first met on the train back in 1991. Why?"

"Well then! Why don't I give your family an extra ticket to the VIP box, and you can invite the Boy-Who-Lived as your personal guest! That way he'll still get to see the Final!"

"Ludo," James said cautiously. "Is there a reason why you're working so hard to get my son into the VIP box?"

"Hmm," Bagman said as if trying to think. "Other than the reasons I already gave you? Well let me just think a bit. Why could I possibly want the most famous and admired boy in all of Wizarding Britain, and also the Savior of our world, to appear among the international dignitaries and celebrities at the climax of the sporting event to which I've devoted the last three years of my life? For that matter, why might I want the most promising young Seeker to hit Hogwarts in a decade to have the best possible view of the Finals and

perhaps think kindly of Good Old Ludo should he ever decide to go pro after graduating?"

Then, Ludo paused and grinned. "Actually, come to think of it, Arthur, if your little girl will be there as well, that's the *two* most promising young Seekers in a decade! By any chance are they dating? Think of how good their kids would be on a broom in fifteen or twenty years! The mind boggles!"

"Ludo," James said firmly. "I will not have my son used by you or anyone else just to advance your own career ambitions."

At that, Perkins, who'd been in the middle of casting another Cooling Charm, actually burst into laughter for a few seconds before getting hold of himself. Arthur glared at him but said nothing, while James suddenly blushed as he realized how hypocritical he sounded. Practically everyone in the Ministry knew how much his own career had been advanced just due to being Jim's father before he'd ruined it all.

"James, James, James," Ludo said reassuringly. "I'm not trying to use your son to advance anything. I really do want to do a favor for your department. I really do admire your son and am grateful for everything he's done for this nation. And I really do want to ensure that an incredibly gifted young Quidditch player has the opportunity to see the game played at its best."

Then, he grinned amiably. "*And* if young Jim ends up sitting with Minister Fudge on one side and Arthur here on the other and it leads to a discussion during a time-out about how your department needs a better office? Or, at the very least, functional air conditioning? Well, who's going to complain?"

James sighed and gave in. "Okay, Jim would be sitting with the Weasleys anyway, so I guess there's no harm in them having better seats for it... assuming *you* don't have any objections, Arthur?"

Arthur opened his mouth to respond but paused at the sight of Ludo's earnest expression.

"... Thank you for your generous gift, Ludo. On behalf of my department and my family, I am happy to accept."

"Splendid! So let's see now. That's you, Molly, and seven-no, *eight* -kids. Will the Lady Potter be coming along with Jim?"

James laughed. "Only if he ends up *playing* . Lily hates Quidditch. She didn't even enjoy watching *me* play until we started dating."

"And Molly won't need a ticket either," Arthur added. "She says she'll be manning the 3M food booth and waiting for the aftergame crowd to show up while the kids are watching the match."

"3M?" Ludo said in confusion.

"Molly's Magical Morsels!" Weasley said proudly.

"Oh yes, of course! Your wife's catering business! I've heard wonderful things about it!"

"I'll make sure she saves you a plate," Arthur replied genially.

Ludo nodded and then turned to the third worker in the office. "And what about you, Parkins? How many tickets will you need?"

"Perkins," he said bitingly. "And none. I'm having the Healers at St. Mungo's work on my back the Monday before the Finals, and then I'll be laid up all week." He turned towards James with a sneer. "So I guess you'll be on your own for a while."

James nodded with a tight smile. "*Yes, Perkins,*" he thought to himself. "*Because you always contribute so much to the office when you're actually here .*"

"Oh that's too bad, *Perkins,*" Ludo said. "I hope you have a full recovery. Well, that's all I had to share. Arthur, I'll get you those tickets the first of next week. Ta-ta for now!"

Bagman gave a jaunty salute and exited the MMA Office with a spring in his step. After a quick elevator ride down to Level 7, he stepped out and headed towards his own office. Along the way, he passed by a large waiting area and noticed a hulking brute of a wizard wearing expensive but understated robes who was sitting alone while reading a back issue of the *Quidditch Times* . Bagman paused, and the wizard turned to look at him impassively. Ludo swallowed somewhat painfully and then nodded twice before quickly heading on into his office.

A few minutes later, Hyades Selwyn returned the magazine he'd been pretending to read to the rack on the wall before leaving the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Elsewhere in the Ministry, his younger sister would be waiting for his report.

Blackstone

A few hours later

Once the meeting had concluded, Harry and company returned to Blackstone. Regulus left at once to fill Sirius in on what they'd learned during the meeting, leaving Harry, Theo, and Amy to see Hermione off. From Blackstone, Hermione would return to her father's flat. Then, after eating dinner with him, he would deliver her to Emma Granger who would have custody for the following week.

"And since Mother refuses to get a Floo connection," Hermione said in a huff, "I'm pretty much stuck there for the next week. I mean, I can bike to the local library and spend the day reading, but otherwise, I'm trapped by myself in suburbia."

"Where is your mum all day while you're home alone?" Amy asked.

Hermione chuckled. "At work with Daddy. Ironically, they still work together just fine. In fact, they both say the practice is running better than ever since they've separated." Then, she frowned. "Presumably because the office is full of drills and computers and medical equipment, and everything is nice and Mugglish. There's nothing there to remind Mum about magic."

Harry winced at that.

"So," he said, changing the subject, "have you thought any more about joining us for the Cup? The Blacks, the Malfoys, and the Zabini's are setting up tents together. And Mrs. Weasley is catering it!"

Hermione hesitated. "Harry, do you think... do you think it would be okay if my father came to the Cup?"

"Well, of course!" Harry exclaimed. "I mean, I'm pretty sure he won't be affected by my... you know..."

"I thought we were calling it '*Bob*' for some bizarre reason," Theo noted.

"*Anyway*," Harry continued. "We'll have plenty of room so..."

Hermione shook her head. "No, Harry. I don't mean would you mind if he came and stayed with the rest of us. I mean... would my father *be okay* if he came. He's a Muggle, after all, and there will be, what, 100,000 wizards and witches there? Will it... cause problems?"

Harry and Theo looked at one another.

"I... don't think so?" Harry said, though the questioning tone showed that he had some doubts.

"Does he want to come?" Amy asked. "Does he even know anything about Quidditch?"

"No, which is the *reason* he wants to come. You see, my wizarding ancestry comes through him. He's technically a Squib who's only four generations removed from a wizarding ancestor: Simon Dagworth-Granger, who was the Squib brother of Hector Dagworth-Granger, founder of the non-Noble House of Dagworth-Granger and a very famous Potioneer. Simon's the one who dropped the Dagworth part, apparently out of anger towards his wizarding relatives. So anyway, Daddy... well, he wants to '*explore his heritage*,' which I think means he wants to spend time among wizards and probably interact with them with the exact same level of sophistication that Mr. Weasley uses when he tries to talk to Muggles."

"Uh-huh," Theo said. "Except Mr. Weasley wants to meet people who don't believe Magic is real while your dad wants to meet people who are terrified of Muggles *finding out* that

Magic is real. I can see how that might, well, *go catastrophically wrong* ."

"Be that as it may, Hermione," Harry said, "I'll talk to Sirius and Reg and see what they think."

"Thanks, Harry. Well then, goodnight!" Hermione gave a friendly hug to each of the three in turn. Then, she stepped into the Floo and called out "Dan Granger residence!" before disappearing in a gout of flames.

"So," Amy said as the fire died down. "Which of you is asking her out first?"

"What do you mean?" asked Harry. "She's been over here for most of the summer."

"No, *Cousin Harry* ! When are you asking Hermione out on a date?"

"What? Why? What? Who?" Harry answered unintelligibly. Amy rolled her eyes while Theo just laughed.

"Come on! You're totally into her! You both are! She's the only one who can hug either of you without making you flinch!"

"Hermione's just a friend, Amy," Theo said, even as his own face suddenly flushed with embarrassment.

"Indeed," Harry added. "My best friend, to be sure, but still just a friend."

"Wait! I thought / was your best friend!" Theo said with mock outrage.

"Nope, you're my unofficially adopted and highly annoying little brother. That bumps you right out of the 'friend' category." Harry turned to Amy.

"And besides, I've gotten much better at not flinching during hugs!" he said defensively.

Amy looked at him dubiously and then swiftly stepped forward to hug the boy. After about three seconds, he managed to relax and put his arms around his adopted little sister's back.

"See?" he said through gritted teeth. "I'm perfectly relaxed."

Amy sighed in exasperation. "Pitiful, Harry. Just pitiful." With that, she stepped back from Harry and moved towards the fireplace. "Right then. I'm going to pop over to the Weasleys and talk to Ginny for a bit. I'll be back in time for supper."

She tossed a pinch of Floo powder into the fire. "The Burrow!" she said with authority.

"Don't talk to Ginny about any secret stuff," Harry warned. "She's under oath, but I think the Twins are experimenting with magical listening devices."

Amy glanced back at him with a grin. "No fears, Cousin Harry! And also Adopted Cousin Theo! Ginny and I will have *loads* to talk about that has nothing to do with our super-secret conspiracy."

After she'd passed through the fire, Theo looked at Harry quizzically. "What do you suppose that was all about?"

"No idea," Harry said guardedly. "But for some reason, I sense impending doom."

Suddenly, both boys jumped slightly at the loud POP behind them.

"Dobby sincerely hopes that Dobby's arrival is not connected in any way to Master Harry's... *doom* ." Harry's personal house elf had arrived bearing a silver platter with a sealed envelope on it. "But Dobby has a letter for Master Harry which arrived by owl this afternoon. Dobby can confirm that the missive itself is not *doom-laden*, though Dobby has, of course, not read the contents."

Harry and Theo looked at one another. Theo shrugged, and then Harry picked up the letter. He recognized the crest of House Greengrass on the front. After a brief hesitation, he opened it.

Later in Sirius's Room...

"So that's everything we talked about today," Regulus said. "How did Nymphadora's swearing-in go."

"Oh, fine," Sirius said. "No hitches of any kind. Plus, I got to see Amelia Bones again."

Regulus pursed his lips. "The Chief Auror? Sirius, please don't tell me she's one of your paramours from back in the day!"

"Okay, I won't tell you." Sirius smirked mischievously.

Reg closed his eyes. "Yes, I suppose I did walk straight into that one. Never mind. I don't wish to hear any sordid details about any past relations with Amelia Bones who is, what, ten years your senior?"

"Twelve, but who's counting?"

"You apparently," Regulus drawled. "Meanwhile, in other less prurient news, Severus asked me to relay a question to you."

"Oh? What does he want to know?"

"Only whether you've had any contact with Remus Lupin. Apparently, the man hasn't been answering any owls since he sauntered off back to Shangri-La or whatever."

"Shamballa," Sirius corrected.

"You may consider that included under '*or whatever.*'"

The older brother laughed. "And to answer your question, no, I have not heard from Remus in months. But I'll send an owl to the Dalai Lama or the Grand Poobah or whoever runs Shamballa in the morning. I have to send one to Dumbledore anyway. It suddenly occurred to me that he might know what happened to my old motorbike."

"Sirius... !" Regulus began warningly, but before he could start on a lecture, there was a knock on the door.

"Enter!" Sirius called. It was Harry with Theo following behind. "Ah! And what can I do for my favorite godson?"

"Well, I've just gotten a letter containing a possible business opportunity, but I wanted some advice from a responsible adult. Unfortunately, Artemus Podmore bills time-and-a-half on the weekends, so I had to settle for you two."

"You wound me, Harry!" Sirius said dramatically. "What's up?"

Harry held up the letter he'd just received. "What would you say if I told you that *Teen Witch Weekly* wants to do a cover story on me?"

Fifteen minutes earlier, at the Burrow

"Of course I would *love* to have young Jim here help out, Lady Potter," said Molly.

"Please, call me Lily," said Jim's mum kindly.

"Of course, Lily, dear! But... well, I can only pay a Galleon a day right now. And it'll be very demanding work!" Molly turned to the Boy-Who-Lived who was presently sitting next to Ron with an eager, pleading expression.

Aside from Jim's desire to find gainful employment so that he could earn spending money of his own, *Molly's Magical Morsels* would have a food stall set up at the Quidditch World Cup, and from the way Ron and the Twins talked, there was plenty of time between their shifts to watch some of the matches. Earlier that day, Ron had gotten to see the entire Chudley-Jamaica match. And with very good seats... since the Cannons barely filled a quarter of the stadium. Jim tried not to dwell on the fact that a year earlier, he and his father had talked of camping onsite for the whole three weeks, with VIP box seats for the whole event.

"That's all over for now," he thought. *"Let it go. At least until you can find a way to get it all back!"*

"You can count on me, Mrs. Weasley!" he said aloud. "I'm no stranger to hard work!"

Nearby, the Weasley Twins glanced at one another and smirked. From their own experience, Jim Potter was likeable enough and incredibly talented on a broom but otherwise somewhat lazy and spoiled. And as far as they could tell, he wasn't so much a stranger to hard work as someone who probably wouldn't recognize hard work if it knocked on his

door while wearing a name tag. But Ron had been worried all summer long about how his best friend was handling everything that had happened lately, and it would do both boys good to spend some time together at the Cup, so they kept their opinions to themselves.

"Still, Jim," said Molly cautiously. "I'm a little concerned about having someone as famous as you working in my little stall. I mean, it'll no doubt be good for business-not that I would *ever* want to take advantage of your fame, Jim-but will it be *safe* for you there? I won't actually be on hand, you see, as I'll be handling the catering side of things. Of course Bill and Charlie will be taking turns managing the stall..."

"How did you rope them into helping out?!" Ginny asked in amazement.

"Oh, there was no roping involved, Ginny," she said. "They're both good boys who love their Mum!"

All four of the Weasley children in the room assumed matching expressions of dubiousness.

"And also... I may have said that if they helped out, I would promise not to comment on either their romantic partners, their career choices, or their hairstyles for a full year."

Fred whistled. Coming from Molly Weasley, it was a *very* generous offer.

"Anyway, Lily, are you not concerned about whether your Jim will be safe under those working conditions?"

Lily sighed. "I always worry about Jim. That part's unavoidable. But nearly every Auror and hit wizard in Britain will be on hand, *plus* the Ministry is deputizing half the DMLE to act as additional security. However, if you're still

worried, we could always come up with some sort of disguise for Jim."

She smiled at her son who simply rolled his eyes at the thought of there being any sort of disguise that could keep people from recognizing the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Ah!" Fred said sharply before bolting out of the living room and up the stairs. He returned about thirty seconds later clutching a vial in his hand. George's own face lit up.

"Is that...?" he asked with a grin.

"It is!" Fred answered with a matching smile before handing the vial to a suddenly nervous Jim.

"What is it?" he asked doubtfully.

"It's the *perfect* disguise!" the Twins said in unison.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Potter," one said. "It's 100% safe and thoroughly field tested!" said the other.

After a moment's hesitation, Jim shrugged and threw back the vial without a care. It was hardly the first prank item from the Twins he'd consumed. There had been that Ton-Tongue Toffee they'd gotten him to try earlier in the summer, after all. A second after he downed the potion, he hiccuped loudly.

And then, he promptly went ginger.

Jim's hair turned a brilliant orange-red, freckles popped out all over his face, and his nose broadened in shape to match Ron's. Except for his distinctive glasses and the world-famous "V" scar on his face, Jim could easily pass for a member of the Weasley family!

Despite herself, Lily laughed. Meanwhile, Jim jumped up to check his own face in the nearest mirror before laughing himself.

"It lasts for twelve hours," said Fred, "but there's an antidote if you want to end it early. Though honestly, I can't imagine why anyone would ever want to surrender those noble features!"

The group's general levity was suddenly interrupted by an angry voice coming down the stairs.

"For pity's sake!" Percy exclaimed as he came down the stairs to the landing in a huff. "I am trying to work up here! Can you please-OH!" He stopped abruptly on seeing Lily. "Oh, I do apologize. I didn't know we had company."

"Hey, Mum?" Fred inquired. "Bill and Charlie are coming in to help run your food stall, Mum, and the rest of us plus Jim are your paid minions. But why isn't Perfect Ex-Prefect Percy helping out?"

"Pfft!" Percy snorted. "Who do you think has been doing Mum's accounts every other night after I get in from a long day at the Ministry? But we're short-staffed this week-Bertha Jorkins is apparently out sick. Mr. Crouch was *furious*. Of all the times to lose his most valued employee!"

"I was in school with Bertha!" exclaimed Molly, whose children often suspected that she somehow knew everyone in Wizarding Britain. "Clever girl. Memory like a Jobberknoll's."

"Unfortunately," Percy added, "the problem with having a perfect memory is that you forget to write things down. She was the one who liaised between Mr. Crouch and," he sniffed disdainfully, "*Ludo Bagman* about the Cup's scheduling and

security arrangements. It's taking three other people from the DIMC to fill in for her in keeping the Cup on schedule and free of international incidents!"

Then, he barked out a laugh. "Though it's probably too late for an international incident, I think."

"What do you mean?" Jim asked.

"I really can't say, I'm afraid. But check out tomorrow's *Prophet*. I'm sure it'll be front page news."

"Still, Bartemius is pulling you in to help with international relations?" Lily asked. "That's very impressive, Percy."

He coughed and blushed. "Well, it's more like he's pulled me in to deal with all the secondary projects that are supposed to belong to the people he's reassigned to handle international relations. Which is why right now, I'm trying to finish a report on international standards for cauldron thickness that's due by Monday."

"Oh yeah," Ron snickered. "That'll change the world, that report will. Front page of the *Daily Prophet*, I expect."

Percy looked down his nose at his youngest brother.

"You might sneer, Ron, but unless some sort of international law is imposed, we might well find the market flooded with flimsy, shallow-bottomed products that *Merlin's Bones*, I'm boring myself with the sound of my own voice! "

Everyone laughed at that, including Percy himself.

"Still, work is work," he said. "And I'd best get back to mine. Lady Potter, a pleasure to see you again."

He bowed gallantly and then returned to his room. But then, before the conversation could resume, the Floo lit up, and a voice could be heard.

"Ginny, it's Amy! Can I come through? I've got gossip to share!"

Ginny glanced around the room. In particular, she noticed that both Lily and Jim stiffened at Amy's voice. After an instant's consideration, Ginny decided to live dangerously.

"Sure, Amy! Come on in!" Then, she turned to Molly with an innocent expression. "Oh! It *is* okay if Amy comes to visit, isn't it, Mum?"

"Of course, dear," replied Molly, who seemed placidly unaware of the responses that Amy's name provoked in her guests.

A second later, Amy Wilkes stepped out of the Weasley's Floo and dusted herself off before looking around the room. She was surprised to see Lily Potter present and utterly flummoxed to see a redheaded and befreckled Jim Potter as well.

"Oh, am I interrupting something?" she said mildly. "Jim's makeover, perhaps?"

The Ginger-Who-Lived fumed but did not rise to the bait.

"Nothing I need to be here for, I think," said Ginny as she rose from the couch and headed for the stairs. "So let's go up to my room and talk. Now what sort of gossip have you brought for me?"

Amy glanced back to the four Gryffindor boys still sitting in the living room and smirked.

"Well for starters, Draco Malfoy is back in town, and he is hot, hot, *hot!* "

Instantly, she and Ginny both broke out into a fit of giggles at the sight of Jim's face, which was almost as red as his hair.

Beside him, Lily was more thoughtful as she considered Percy's remarks and wondered what sort of "international incident" would be in the next day's papers.

13 August 1994

AUSTRALIA'S ADVANCE TO QWC QUARTER-FINALS

HERALDS DARK LORD'S RETURN!

By Andrew Smudgley, Staff Writer

The accompanying article was as histrionic and provocative as one might expect from the paper even in the absence of Rita Skeeter, who was still on leave. The writer harshly attacked both Ludovic Bagman and Barty Crouch for their mutual lapses in judgment during the negotiations that led to the Quidditch World Cup returning to British soil. For part of the price paid for that honor was that Wizarding Britain was required to grant full diplomatic immunity to any foreign officials who attended the event as official representatives of the nations that made it past the Preliminary rounds.

What neither Bagman nor Crouch nor any of the other negotiators considered was that the Australian team might actually stage an upset win and make it into the Quarterfinals. Which, in turn, opened the door for the *Dark Lord Alexander McAvity* to return to Wizarding Britain for the first time in over twenty-five years. And indeed, the

notorious Muggleborn Dark Lord was scheduled to arrive by International Portkey that morning in time to attend the Australia-Uganda match later that night. The rest of the article was full of lurid accounts of McAvity's notorious history: his "dangerously subversive anti-Pureblood agenda," a list of the various crimes of which he was accused prior to his flight from Britain (but, conspicuously, for which no evidence of his guilt was mentioned), and an exhaustive account of the terrorist activities to which his acolytes resorted after his expulsion.

In fact, the article about Alexander McAvity and his return to Britain was so sensationalistic and over the top that few readers even noticed the much smaller headline above a brief article buried on the bottom of page 4.

GOBLET OF FIRE ARRIVES IN UK

TO BE DISPLAYED AT WORLD CUP FINALS

Elsewhere...

Mr. Norvegicus grinned as he set the newspaper aside. "The Cup's here, and right on schedule. It will be in place by noon."

"Of course," said Mr. Nemo as he finished up the last of his scrambled eggs and toast before washing it down with some pumpkin juice. "I never doubted it. Mr. January hasn't failed us yet."

"*Please...*" moaned the woman. Though she shared a table with the two Death Eaters, she could not partake of breakfast on account of the heavy ropes which bound her tightly to her chair.

"And McAvity's here as well!" Mr. Norvegicus exclaimed with a laugh before pausing and frowning his brow. "Hang on. Did we actually arrange that? Or was it just luck?"

"We did nothing to ensure the Australians made it to the Quarter-Finals. And we certainly did nothing to encourage the Australian government to deliberately snub the British Ministry by sending McAvity as part of their delegation. Even our Lord was surprised by the news."

"Let me go... please... I want to go home..."

Mr. Norvegicus's eyes gleamed in cruel delight, even as he ignored the woman's whimpers. "So... luck then. A good omen, I think. Everything would have worked out anyway, I'm sure, but for McAvity to show up? Here and now?"

"Oh yes," Mr. Nemo replied. "That, my friend, is Fate shining down upon us!"

Mr. Norvegicus wiped his face with his napkin. "True. Then again, Fate helps those who help themselves. So shall we get back to it?"

"No... no... I beg you..."

"We shall indeed!" Mr. Nemo exclaimed jovially before pulling out his wand and pointing it at the weeping, broken woman sitting across the table from him. "**LEGILIMENS!**"

And Bertha Jorkins screamed once more.

Next: Against the backdrop of the World Cup, the Death Eaters strike!

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2 (What the Sinister Man is reading): Nothing new at the moment.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: aGnamZer0, AjithSen, Artish zana, BlueWater5,. Bob, brontokz, Elfangor, EssayOfThoughts | Aich, Forge. Gesh, jaa'm, JCornell, Jennifer the green Duckling, kean, laTia, LFGBY, Miss TerBean (Rubber Duck Cult), Mr Tanuary, PrettyPinkCupcake, Rubric of Ahriman, Sakkiko, SHADOW, TzarDeRus, and Webstriker|Datti. Thanks, guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 16,322. Followers: 17,116. Favorites: 15,322. Communities: 239. Discord followers: 4132! Go Team POS!

The Quidditch World Cup (Part 2)

Chapter 9: The Quidditch World Cup (Part 2)

Check out www.thesinisterman.com for links to my original fiction. Check out the Sinister Man's Discord to discuss all of my fanfic and original work with other fans.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Harry Black

and the Resurrection Game

Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.

Chapter 9: The Quidditch World Cup (Pt 2)

13 August 1994

The Department of International Magical Cooperation

Office of International Portkey Arrivals & Departures

9:59 a.m.

Bartemius Crouch, Director of the DIMC, checked his pocket watch and then glowered even more than usual. This was astonishing to Percy Weasley, who'd worked for the man all summer and had thought Crouch already glowered as much as any human being possibly could. In addition to his long-

suffering intern, Director Crouch (he'd had the "Sr." struck from his official stationery years before after the incarceration of his Death Eater son) was flanked by a number of other Ministry personnel: Chief Auror Amelia Bones and DMLE Director Corban Yaxley, along with every Hit Wizard and Auror not already on-site at the Quidditch World Cup. Chief Warlock Dumbledore was on hand as well, though Percy suspected his presence was meant to keep the British wizards from doing something stupid rather than to deter the "diplomatic envoy" from doing... well, whatever it was everyone else was afraid that the legendary *Dark Lord McAvity* was going to do.

Privately, Percy thought the show of force was ridiculous overkill. Whatever McAvity had done back in the 1960s to warrant banishment from Wizarding Britain, he was presently the Director of the Australian Department of Magical-Muggle Relations and the fourth highest figure in the Australian wizarding government. More importantly, he had complete diplomatic immunity, which made the British Ministry's show of force even more farcical. Unless McAvity fired off an Unforgiveable immediately after his Portkey arrival, none of the assembled law enforcement officials would be able to touch him.

"*Or them, as the case may be,*" Percy thought to himself as the wizard's Portkey finally delivered him to the scene... along with his sizeable entourage. Apparently, like Dumbledore, the Australian delegation had been (justifiably) worried about the Ministry doing something stupid. Suddenly appearing within the Portkey staging area were more than twenty people all holding onto what looked to be fifty feet of garden hose to which the Portkey Charm had been affixed. The arrivals were arranged in somewhat concentrically, with Alexander McAvity in the very center, ten or so other diplomatic personnel clumped around him,

and a dozen Australian Aurors in the outside. Oh, and what appeared to be an odd-looking canine with a yellow "Team Australia" bandana wrapped around its neck. The visiting Aurors had their wands drawn but not yet pointed at anyone.

Percy, whose wand was *not* drawn, had a brief frisson of panic as he wondered who would be best to duck behind for cover if the curses started flying. "*Probably Dumbledore*," he thought. Thankfully, violence did not erupt, and the visiting Aurors relaxed and put their wands away.

"Expecting trouble, McAvity?" Crouch growled angrily.

"Not at all... Crouch," said the infamous Muggleborn. "But it's my first time in Britain in decades. And considering how *excitable* your Ministry gets whenever my name is mentioned, well, my security detail insisted on extra caution."

He looked past Crouch to the score of British Aurors and Hit Wizards behind him. "As I'm sure you understand."

Then, his attention was drawn to Dumbledore who stood just behind Crouch and was resplendent in his mauve and yellow robes. McAvity grinned broadly.

"And it's wonderful to see you again, Supreme Mugwump. How long has it been?"

"Just shy of two years, Alexander," Dumbledore answered amiably. "And I have asked you repeatedly to call me Albus when the ICW is not in session."

McAvity laughed. "Do forgive me, sir, but I just don't think I have it in me to be so familiar with you. Shall we compromise? I'll just call you Headmaster."

With that, McAvity opened up his coat to reveal that in addition to his "Team Australia" Quidditch jersey, he was also wearing a somewhat worn Ravenclaw scarf that Percy thought must have been from the older man's school days. The blue and bronze clashed wildly with Australia's yellow and green color scheme. Percy fought to keep a smile off his face, as he wasn't about to share his amusement at "the Muggleborn Dark Lord" while standing so close to his irascible boss.

Meanwhile, visibly alarmed at how this "diplomatic exchange" had already gone off the rails, Amelia Bones stepped forward.

"Director McAvity, I am Amelia Bones, Chief of the British Auror Corps. On behalf of the Fudge Administration, I would like to formally and officially welcome you to Wizarding Britain."

McAvity smiled at her warmly. "Thank you, Madam Bones! On behalf of Wizarding Australia, we are all honored to be here."

Amelia turned and gestured to Yaxley, who was beside her.

"And this is Corban Yaxley, Director of the British DMLE who will be overseeing on-site security for the Cup."

Yaxley took a step forward and bowed. "Director McAvity," he said simply.

McAvity continued to smile, but Percy immediately noted that it was suddenly not nearly so amiable.

"Yaxley, is it? I went to Hogwarts with a Vespasian Yaxley back in the day. He was a Fifth Year Slytherin when I was Sorted."

"Vespasian was my father," the other man said.

"Ah, and how is your dear father?"

Yaxley frowned slightly. "He died during the war, Director McAvity."

"Oh? I'm so terribly sorry to hear that. Whose side was he on?"

"Well anyway," Crouch interrupted before a visibly angry Yaxley could respond. "Now that the diplomatic pleasantries are over..."

"Really?" interrupted McAvity. "I hadn't realized they'd ever started."

Crouch sneered. "*As I was saying.* The portkey to the Cup facilities leaves in one hour. Before you can go, however, you and all your... people... will have to register your wands. As required by the QWC public safety regulations, you understand."

"I fully understand the regulations, Director Crouch," said McAvity with a bland expression. "Seeing as I helped write them back when we held the Cup at Uluru in 1986. Though I am curious as to why you're actually bothering to enforce them against the Australian delegation when, as I understand it, you pretty much just waved all the other nations through."

Crouch started to snarl a response when McAvity interrupted.

"*Nevertheless*, rules are rules, and we will, of course, comply with your registration requirements."

"Good," the other man snapped. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to oversee the arrangements to transport the Goblet of Fire for its installation at the Cup Stadium."

"Oh, yes," McAvity said merrily. "I saw a picture of your Goblet thingy in the papers. It's very nice."

This time, Crouch *did* snarl. "*Weatherby* ! Get everybody's wands registered!"

With that, Crouch turned and stalked off, with Yaxley and Bones close behind. Percy frowned at his boss's use of the wrong name for him (for the *fourth* time!) but merely nodded rather than correcting the older wizard. Dumbledore shook his head and clapped Percy on the shoulder before turning back to McAvity.

"Alas, Alexander, I will not be attending the Cup. To be brutally honest, if I don't have students involved, I find Quidditch frightfully dull. But you have a standing invitation to come visit me at Hogwarts while you're here in Britain."

"I shall take you up on that, Headmaster."

Dumbledore shook the man's hand and made his own way to the nearest Floo back to Hogwarts. McAvity turned to Percy.

"Well then, Mr.... Weatherby, is it?"

"Weasley, actually," Percy said with some embarrassment.

"Uh-huh. So does Crouch not know your name, or is he just being a wanker?"

Percy's eyes bulged slightly, and he took a moment to clear his throat. "Ahem. If you would step this way, Director McAvity," he said diplomatically.

Percy handled the processing with his usual efficiency, and the wand registration took less than fifteen minutes for the entire delegation. Near the end of the process, two people moved forward together, an older man in a somewhat weathered Auror's coat and a young woman in Muggle civilian attire. The canine came along with them. With her black hair pulled back into a ponytail, the girl looked to be not much older than Percy himself. She also seemed slightly nervous, though Percy attributed that to the scene that Crouch and McAvity had put on earlier.

"Name, occupation, and wand?" he asked the older man politely.

"Macmillan. Buck Macmillan. Senior Auror, retired. Eucalyptus with a Bunyip hair core." Then, he gestured down to the animal.

"And since my familiar can't rightly speak for himself, I'll answer for him. Reggie MacMillan, short for Reginald. Tasmanian wolf. No wand but a hell of a bite."

As if to prove his owner right, Reggie opened its mouth in a wide yawn. Percy's eyes widened, but when it became clear that the creature was not about to tear his throat out, he shrugged.

"As I recall, Auror Macmillan, Muggles believe Tasmanian wolves to be extinct. Can I assume that you know the proper Charms to conceal Reggie's true nature from any Muggles you encounter?"

"Yeah, there's a Charm on his bandana that will cause Muggles to see him as a Jack Russell terrier."

"Works for me," said Percy. Then, he and Buck each touched their wands to the card which Percy had placed on the table

between them. Instantly, the card verified Buck's statements before transfiguring itself into an ID badge on a lanyard which represented both Buck's diplomatic attaché status and his ticket to the VIP box at the Cup.

"You said you were retired?"

"Yup! I was happily splitting my time between training my apprentice here and fly-fishing when I got reactivated for this job."

Percy glanced at the pretty young woman standing next to him.

"Oh! You're an Auror Trainee?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I may apply in the future, but right now, I'm just working for a DADA Mastery."

Percy tilted his head. The girl's accent sounded Australian to his untrained ears, but it was different than Macmillan's. He slid another card in front of her.

"Name?" Percy began going through his list of questions.

"White," she said with a smile. "*Delphini* White."

Norvegicus,

Target 3 has arrived at Ministry. Target 1 to be relocated to Dartmoor within the hour.

Misericorde

The QWC Stadium

11:30 a.m.

"That is... not nearly as impressive as I was expecting," said James Potter as he looked dubiously at the fabled Goblet of Fire. Nearly every Auror and Hit Wizard had been assigned to work security either for the Cup grounds or for the arrival of the Australian delegation, the latter of which was a ridiculous waste of manpower in James's opinion.

Accordingly, the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office had been temporarily deputized so that there would be at least *someone* who knew how to handle a wand on hand when the "priceless relic of a forgotten age" was installed prior to the start of the first quarterfinals match (Australia vs. Uganda) at two o'clock.

When asked, James jumped at the chance to deliver the Goblet to its installation site just below the VIP box at the stadium.

"Funny," he mused to himself. "A year ago, I'd have thought this beneath me. And now, I'm happy to volunteer for scut work just to get out of that sweltering office for a while. Plus, I at least get to see the stadium even if I'll miss all the matches. "

Shaking off that lingering disappointment, James regarded the infamous Goblet of Fire. He'd expected something grand, or at least imposing, given its history. But it was, in fact, a rough-hewn wooden cup, completely unadorned and standing less than two feet tall. Most would be forgiven for thinking it was completely unmagical other than the soft glow of blue flames emanating from inside. But when James opened up its container and reached down to grab it, he suddenly jerked his hand back. For just a second, he was startled by the magical power that radiated from the Goblet

of Fire. And also the brief sensation of being judged by a powerful yet not remotely human intelligence.

More hesitantly, James picked up the Goblet and handed it over to Percy who also blanched and shuddered upon touching the artifact. Then, he in turn handed it off to Joseph Abbot, the Squib who oversaw the Ministry's Maintenance Department. Joe, as his friends called him, did not appear to feel anything at all emanating from the Goblet, and he shrugged before placing it gently on the white marble column that had been placed here for display purposes.

"Okay, Young Mr. Weasley," he said. "How does it look?"

"It looks fine, Mr. Abbott," Percy replied. "And please do call me Percy! You've known my family since I was in short pants!"

"Aye, and I'll be happy to call you Percy when we're off the clock. But right now, we're not. And there's appearances to be maintained, so you'll be Young Mr. Weasley."

Percy grimaced. "Very well. If you insist, Mr. Abbott."

"Please," the Squib said amiably. "Call me Joe."

Percy rolled his eyes, while Joe turned his attention to James.

"And what do you think, Chief... Sorry, no disrespect intended."

Potter winced slightly. "None taken, Joe."

"So," Joe continued respectfully. "What *do* folks call you now, if you don't mind me asking?"

James opened his mouth and then paused. After a second, he turned quizzically to Percy. "What's your dad's official title, Percy?"

The young man was surprised at the question. "I'm pretty sure it's just... Mr. Weasley."

James nodded and turned back to Joe. "You can call me Mr. Potter then, Joe. Though I hope you'll call me James when we're '*off the clock*' as you put it."

Abbott nodded with a smile. "Will do. And now that we know what to call one another, how do you think this overrated brandy snifter looks? Does it need any adjustments? I mean, once it's in place, no one's going to be able to get to it for a while."

"Oh?" James asked. "Why not?"

Percy spoke up. "The Goblet is enchanted to light up fully at the conclusion of the Minister's opening speech. Just pyrotechnics, though. None of its more... *legendary* properties will be invoked. Thereafter, it will remain lit from then through the closing ceremonies that will be held on the Sunday after the final match on 27 August. And until then, there will be a network of protective wards around it that will prevent anyone from getting close to it or interfering with it. It is a priceless historical artifact, after all."

Joe snorted. "It's made of *wood*, Young Mr. Weasley. I'm pretty sure I could whittle something more impressive than that in a week or two if you gave me a big enough block of pine. Well, I mean, you couldn't set it on fire or whatever you plan to do with it, but still!"

Percy coughed in embarrassment. "Yes, well, it's a *3,000-year-old* piece of wood with a host of magical properties. It

doesn't have to *look* impressive."

His last comment was belied by his doubtful tone. The Goblet's appearance was indeed rather dull when compared to its lurid history.

"Wait, so there's *no way* to get to it if something goes wrong?" James asked in mild concern.

"Not easily," Percy answered. "The only person keyed into the ward scheme is Bertha Jorkins, and she's out sick with Spattergoit."

"I'd heard it was Black Cat Flu," Joe interrupted. Percy shrugged.

"Regardless, unless she recovers and returns to work in the next few days, the only way to get through the wards before Sunday would be to get a half-dozen cursebreakers in to disassemble the ward scheme."

"Why are the wards keyed just to *Bertha Jorkins*, though?" James asked. "I'd have assumed that both Ludo and Barty would have insisted on having sole access."

Joe laughed. "They did! They argued for a week over who would get the honor, and whether it was the responsibility of the DMGS or the DIMC. And finally, Bertha, who was working for *both* departments, lost her temper and linked the ward scheme to her own bio-something whatsit..."

"Biomagical signature," Percy supplied.

"Yeah, that. Anyway, she used her own signature without telling either of them. The way I heard it, both Barty and Ludo each nearly blew a gasket over it!"

James looked at him in confusion.

"Gasket, Mr. Potter," Percy explained. "It's a Muggle thing... though I don't know anything about them except that it's a bad thing when they... blow."

Joe laughed. "Heh. Purebloods," he muttered, though he was careful to speak quietly enough for neither to overhear.

To all,

Target 1 is in place. Security protocols activated.

January

Blackstone

2:00 p.m.

After consulting with all of his adult advisors, Harry finally said yes to *Teen Witch Weekly* 's request for an interview. When he mentioned that he had no idea why anyone would want to interview him, Artie just laughed before going through the list of fame-worthy things Harry had done in just the last year. In any case, it helped that the interviewer would be a friendly one. While Harry's fellow Wizengamot Lord, Daniel Greengrass, split his time between politics and international shipping and finance, his wife, Winifred Greengrass had found herself with lots of free time once her two daughters had started school. Prior to marrying Daniel, the former Winifred Abbott had been a journalist writing for the *Daily Prophet*, specifically for its Fashion and Living sections. Thus, when she applied to work at *Teen Witch Weekly*, her status and resume meant that she had no problem getting the job.

The fact that Lord Greengrass privately bought a controlling interest in the magazine probably didn't hurt.

Lady Greengrass ("Please, Harry, call me Winnie!") arrived just before noon, and she joined Harry for lunch in the solarium. She praised the boy for his good taste in the architectural and design changes he'd made to the former Potter Manor before getting down to business. They talked all through lunch and for an hour afterwards about a range of topics: Harry's death-defying aerial duel against a trio of werewolves and his earlier death-defying aerial duel against a pair of cursed Bludgers the previous year. (He was appropriately modest.) His astonishing performance in front of the Wizengamot when he claimed the dormant Wilkes seat. (He was self-effacing.) His views on various aspects of British Wizarding politics. (He was politely evasive.) His relationship with his godfather, Sirius Black. (He was full of praise.) His relationship with his birth-parents and his twin brother. (He deftly changed the subject.)

As the interview drew to a close, Harry had some questions of his own.

"Lady Greengrass, er, *Winnie*, I am curious. What led you to approach me about this interview?"

"Several reasons, Harry," she answered casually. "To be honest, one of them is spite. You see, the Boy-Who-Lived has steadfastly refused to give us an interview since House Greengrass purchased the magazine. Or more accurately, his *mother* has refused to approve an interview. I assume she's afraid that *Teen Witch Weekly* will now have Slytherin, if not outright Death Eater, sympathies." She scoffed. "As if the Death Eaters ever cared about *fashion* !"

Harry nodded. "I see. So you want to try and build me into a media personality on par with Jim as a way of getting back at House Potter?"

"Would it be a problem if I said yes? And at this point, don't you *want* to be a bigger media personality than Jim Potter?"

Harry said nothing at first. On one hand, the Oath of Enmity he was under made him mildly angry at the idea of being asked for an interview solely as a way to get back at the Potters. On the other, that same Oath of Enmity made the idea of becoming more famous and admired than Jim Potter somewhat attractive.

He frowned and took a moment to focus his Occlumency on his feelings to see which ones were genuine and which were the result of Sirius's ill-considered oath. The results were surprising, as he quickly deduced that Winnie Greengrass's offer of fame and popularity was ultimately just a distraction.

"So that's *one* reason, Winnie," he said easily. "What are the others?"

Winnie smiled. "Well, I must confess-another big reason is that my daughters asked me to. Both Daphne and Astoria are quite fond of you. And in light of your extraordinary achievements, they both encouraged me to reach out to you and see if I and my magazine could help you get the credit and recognition you deserve."

Harry nodded. "And I'm certainly grateful. And also happy to hear that about your daughters. We drifted apart a bit last year what with all that business about Theo No-Name."

Lady Greengrass winced slightly.

"Yes, I was rather upset to hear from my daughters that the unfortunate business had driven a bit of a wedge among the Houses of our alliance. Although I gather your good friend Neville Longbottom was also affected by that and just as strongly, and you have clearly forgiven him for it. I hope you will find your way to be just as forgiving to Daphne and Astoria now that the Ultimate Sanction has been withdrawn and those affected Purebloods in your circle no longer hold their former hostility to young Master Theo."

"Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that Daphne and Astoria are no longer... so affected." He paused and chose his words carefully. "But tell me, Winnie, what do *you* think about that whole Ultimate Sanction business. I mean, a single Wizengamot Lord maliciously invoked a law written centuries ago against his own son that *affected the minds* of every other Wizengamot member along with most of Wizarding Britain. Does that not... trouble you?"

She shrugged almost dismissively. "Harry, I certainly do not defend the actions of Tiberius Nott, and Daniel was more than happy to join you in repealing the Ultimate Sanction provision. But... Magic is Magic. And the price we pay for the right to use Magic as our birthright is that we agree to be subject to its authority. So it was for each one of us from the moment a wand chose us."

"Still, Winnie. Surely you agree that mind control magic should at least be better *regulated*. I guess I'm having trouble seeing why the Imperius is considered Unforgiveable-as it should be-but not, say, a Confundus, even though the latter Charm can be used to violate a witch or wizard's mind just as easily."

She nodded slowly. "Well, it is still illegal to use a Confundus for a criminal purpose. But I think I see where you're going

with this. You would see stronger penalties for illegal Confundus Charms and perhaps a broadening of the circumstances in which a Confundus might be considered illegal."

"That and other similar Charms. For example, I understand how Memory Charms are needed to preserve the Statute of Secrecy, but I still think they're subject to abuse, and I'd like to see the Wizengamot address that. As I understand it, there is no penalty for erasing the memories of a Muggle who witnesses a wizard breaking the Statute of Secrecy in some way. The general attitude seems to be '*if I breach the Statute but erase the memories of all witnesses, then no harm was committed*.' But... I consider mucking about with the memories of someone who can't defend themselves to *be a harm on its own*. I think that, at a minimum, using a Memory Charm on a Muggle in order to cover up one's own misconduct should be considered Misdemeanor Muggle Baiting even if the underlying conduct isn't illegal. That would encourage wizards and witches to be more circumspect in dealing with Muggles, and it would help preserve the Statute while also being more ethical."

Winnie's eyes widened and she smiled. "That's a very interesting way to think about things, Harry. And I applaud your concern for the safety of Muggles. However, such changes to our laws would require a larger and stronger alliance than you presently have. How amenable are you to gaining new allies? And what steps are you willing to take to achieve such goals?"

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly. "What do you mean by that?"

She took a sip of tea as she prepared her thoughts. "This brings us neatly to the *third* reason I set up this interview: I

wanted to *butter you up* as the Muggles say. I have received an overture from House Selwyn."

That caught Harry by surprise. "The Selwyns? My impression from Daphne was that House Greengrass and House Selwyn were rather antagonistic."

Winnie smirked. "At the time Daphne held such opinions, House Selwyn was attempting to pressure House Greengrass into an unfavorable fealty arrangement. Things have changed, however. We are both Ancient & Noble Houses now, even if House Greengrass has held that status for just a year or so compared to the untold centuries that House Selwyn has enjoyed it. Our two Houses are on an even footing, and as a result, the Selwyns have adopted a more conciliatory tone. This should not surprise you. They did join with our alliance to strike the Ultimate Sanction, after all."

Harry nodded slowly. The entire Selwyn alliance did join with Harry's network, as did House Nott. Of course, Lucius Malfoy essentially blackmailed them into it by holding over them the threat of Sirius using the Sanction on Narcissa Malfoy.

"So what do the Selwyns want now?" he asked.

"Put simply, they wish for the support of our alliance in elevating one of their four Cadet Houses to the status of Ancient & Noble House."

Harry did a double-take. "That's... a lot to ask, Winnie. While they helped us with the Ultimate Sanction, I think the Selwyns are opposed to most of my views about what Wizarding Britain should be. Their conduct during the last war..."

"Was the result of one family member, Berith Selwyn, falling in with the Death Eaters and putting several other family

members under the Imperius Curse, Harry. For which Berith made a full confession before dying in Azkaban. If we are judging Houses by their past associations with He- Who- Must-Not-Be-Named, it would be odd for you to reject overtures from the Selwyns while you remain closely allied with House Malfoy and House Black, don't you agree?"

He grimaced. "Still, what are the Selwyns offering in exchange for such an incredible boon?"

"It's not as incredible as it sounds. Honestly, it's just them protecting their vote totals, I think. Uriah Travers is elderly and in ill-health, and he's likely to pass within the next few years without leaving a viable Heir. His death will mean the end of House Travers, thereby costing the Selwyn alliance five votes. By elevating one of their other Cadet branches, they will gain an additional five votes to offset that. And let's be honest. In the modern era, the Ministry of Magic holds far more power over the day-to-day lives of wizard-folk than the Ancient and Noble families. As a practical matter, the extra five votes are the only benefit to be gained by elevation. Plus, the Selwyns are offering to offset their increased voting bloc by giving us the chance to do the same."

Harry blinked. "Oh? How so?"

"Before I married Daniel, I was Winifred Abbott of the Common House of Abbott. If we support the Selwyns in elevating one of their Cadet branches, they will support us in elevating House Abbott to Noble status, thus bringing an additional five votes to *our* bloc. While traditionally Pureblooded-Sacred 28, in fact-House Abbott is generally a progressive House that staunchly opposed You-Know-Who. Indeed, my own father was an Auror personally *murdered* by You-Know-Who in 1978!"

Her voice rose slightly at the end. Harry thought it wise not to share that he'd seen the memory of Auror Abbott's death in Alastor Moody's memories. She took a moment to compose herself.

"And for what it's worth, when I married Daniel, I made him take an oath that he would *never* support the Death Eaters. But I digress. House Abbott is wealthy enough to pay Noble House dues. The putative Lord Abbott, should the House be elevated, would be Gilbert Abbott, my uncle. He's the founder and owner of Quickspell and a self-made millionaire. My cousin, Sam Abbott, who would likely be the Heir, is a Junior Auror. I believe he was present during your encounter with Gilderoy Lockhart at the end of your Second Year. He spoke to me of your bravery in pursuing that lunatic even if you were unable to apprehend him."

"You have another relative who's a Hit Wizard, yes?"

Winifred nodded sadly. "My cousin Lester. He's... he's currently in St. Mungo's. He was one of the Hit Wizards affected by the Toymaker's cursed object."

Harry nodded while the woman dabbed her eyes with a napkin.

"I'm sorry to have raised such a sensitive topic. Hannah Abbott is in your family too, right? She's in my year."

"Yes, Hannah is the daughter of Cousin Joseph. He's a Squib, but he married a Muggleborn named Pamela Cresswell. Her brother Dirk is head of the Goblin Liaison Office." She smiled. "So you see, the Abbotts are historically Purebloods, but we still look after our Squibs. Despite his blood status, we made sure that Joseph stayed in the Wizarding World, got a good-paying job at the Ministry, married a witch, and had

a magical child. And in the process, House Abbott has embraced a family of Muggleborn siblings."

Harry sat back in his chair and thought. He'd held a bit of a grudge against Hannah Abbott just because of her membership in the CPS, but he had no reason to think she was terribly active in it. He made a mental note to talk with Amy about whether Hannah showed any signs of Pureblood bigotry even though she was a Halfblood herself. Voldemort was a Halfblood too, after all.

"You've made a good sales pitch, Winnie. But I need to talk it over with my advisors before I commit to anything."

"Fair enough. Perhaps during the Cup competition, you will do us the honor of dining with us one night. The Greengrasses, Abbotts, and Cresswells are sharing a tent."

Harry smiled. "I look forward to it."

After a bit more discussion about the proposed alliance, Winifred got back to the official reason for her visit and engaged Harry in an animated discussion about his expectations for the QWC, the quality of the tent that the Blacks and Malfoys would be sharing, and, of course, his thoughts on new developments in hair care products.

Later, after Winnie had left, he relayed all that they had discussed to Sirius and Regulus. He also told them the sad story of Lester Abbott and the other Hit Wizards cursed by what was obviously a dark object powered by Parselmagic, and he asked what, if anything, he could do about it without exposing his own secrets.

Targets 4, 5, and 6 will be on-site for entirety of QWC beginning on 8/15. Target 5 to travel by Muggle means.

Vespertine

8:30 p.m.

FINAL SCORE

AUSTRALIA 410

UGANDA 350

As the victorious Aussie Seeker made her lap around the stadium holding the Snitch over her head, the Australian section-nearly 5,000 wizards and witches from Down Under-screamed their jubilation at the victory. Australia was now in the Cup quarterfinals. In the VIP section, Alexander McAvity ecstatically embraced his fellow Aussie dignitaries. Finally, the Seeker flew to the center of the field, faced the Australian section and cast the Amplifying Charm on herself.

"AUSSIE, AUSSIE, AUSSIE!" she chanted.

"OI, OI, OI!" the Australians roared in response.

And perhaps none among them did so more boisterously than Regulus Black, who now wore a face that was an amalgam of three different London newsreaders he'd combined in hopes of being as nondescript as possible. Despite himself, he wiped tears from his eyes. Before his wife and son had died, the White family had already been making plans to attend the 1986 Quidditch World Cup when it came to Australia. While not as big a Quidditch fan as her husband, Matilda White was a patriot through-and-through, and the thought of how she'd have loved to see the

Australian national team rise to such heights, and on English soil no less, made the celebration bittersweet.

As the cheers died down, Regulus made his way towards the exit. He planned to rendezvous with Buck for a celebratory beer, followed by a meetup with "Delphini White," the newly discovered cousin to the late Lazarus White. They had a lot of catching up to do, especially since he didn't yet know any of the cover story that Buck had invented for her.

So intent was Reg on his own mixed emotions of joy, melancholy, and curiosity about his new (old) cousin, he paid no attention to the undercurrent of anger that could be detected among the home crowd sitting in the nearby British section.

14 August 1994

Blackstone

Regulus did not return to Blackstone after Australia's victory. Having had "one too many," he contacted an annoyed Sirius by mirror to drunkenly announce that he would be "crashing on Buck's floor" but would return the next day to help Sirius make his way to the stadium site. Somewhat angrily, Sirius told his younger brother to remain there and that he would make his own travel arrangements.

The next morning, it turned out that Regulus was not the only one who had overdone it in celebrating Australia's exciting victory. For today was the day that Ludovic Bagman and Gwenog Jones were coming to provide audio commentaries for the Eye-Spy recordings of the charity matches staged at Hogwarts eight days earlier. And to everyone's annoyance, Ludo himself showed up an hour late and still badly hungover. Getting yelled at for his

unprofessionalism by the ever bombastic and usually profane captain of the Holyhead Harpies did not help his disposition, although the hangover remedy provided by Dobby did.

Once the furor had died down, Hestia Jones stepped forward with some contracts for both Ludo and Gwenog to sign, while Harry observed. He was aware of the tense relationship between the Jones sisters but had never met Gwenog before today. Seeing them together was illuminating. Indeed, Harry might not have realized they were related had he not known beforehand. For one thing, Gwenog still had a very noticeable Welsh accent while Hestia spoke what Vernon Dursley would have called *the Queen's English*. For another, Gwenog was dark-skinned while her younger sister was light-skinned and, in fact, somewhat pale.

Whatever their differences, Hestia was completely professional as she went over the contracts. Ludo and Gwenog would be paid the sum of 50 galleons each to sit and watch the edited Eye-Spy recordings of the two charity matches and provide an audio commentary which would be inserted into the recordings, as well as 5% each of the profits from any recordings sold. While not a princely sum to people as well off as Jones and Bagman, the Harpies Beater agreed to do it as a favor to her little sister. Despite the friction between them, Harry intuited that they were actually quite close, and their relationship reminded Harry of that of Fred and Percy Weasley in some ways. As for Bagman, it was well-known that the gregarious DMGS Director had a bit of a gambling problem and was always on the look-out for something to bring in a little extra cash.

Six hours later, Jones and Bagman had completed their work under the guidance of Harry, Anthony, Sue, and a starstruck Ginny Weasley (who had threatened Harry with bodily harm

if he denied her the chance to meet Gwenog Jones). Gwenog was quite impressed with the potential of the Eye-Spies and asked if she could tell the owner of the Harpies about it and see if he was interested in marketing recordings of their games. Harry eagerly assented. But that was nothing compared to Bagman's response.

"So how long does it take you to set up these Eye-Spies to record a game?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "Not long at all, really. I think it took us an hour or two to get set up to record at Hogwarts."

Bagman nodded sagely. "So assuming I can get it approved tomorrow morning, would you be able to set up to record the Cup matches starting tomorrow?"

Harry's eyes nearly bugged out of his head, and he suddenly felt weak at the knees. Behind him, Anthony and Sue looked at one another in shock and then delight.

"Um, I would have to consult with my associates and our solicitor, but... probably?"

"Splendid!" Ludo said jovially. "Have her drop by my office around 10 o'clock tomorrow, and we'll see what we can put together."

"D-Definitely," Harry said, still nearly speechless. In truth, he'd wanted Bagman to see what the Eye-Spies could do as a proof of concept. Getting an invitation to record *the Quidditch World Cup* was something beyond his wildest dreams at this point. If things went well, this might be the start of "Harry Black: Media Mogul."

As Hestia escorted the two Quidditch personalities back to the Floo, they were met by Sirius Black who was headed out

as well. Despite himself, he froze in surprise at the sight of Gwenog... and her sister Hestia. While Sirius had resolved to be a perfect gentleman and avoid even the appearance of hanky-panky where his attractive young solicitor was concerned, he still suspected that Hestia might harbor some ill-will over his long-ago one-night fling with Gwenog. But that did not prepare him for the reaction of Gwenog herself.

"Well, now. Sirius Black as I live and breathe!" said the Quidditch star.

"Gwenog Jones!" he replied easily. "It's a pleasure to see you again. How long has it been?"

"Far, far too long, Blackie," she said with a cheeky grin. "So, are you all recovered from Azkaban?" she asked with her characteristic bluntness. "Everything back in working order again?"

"Gwenog!" hissed a scandalized Hestia.

"Oh hush, Baby Sister," the other witch replied. "Blackie and I go way back together. Four violent years smashing Bludgers at each other's faces. Plus one night of fumbling teenage passion that I for one remember well. Do you still have that little parting gift I left for you?"

Sirius Black blushed for the first time in over a decade. "Um, possibly. I'm not entirely sure what happened to all my... Hogwarts mementos after I went to... well, you know."

Gwenog moved closer to the flustered Sirius and grinned at his discomfort. "Well, Blackie, you should know, I still have the parting gift I *took in exchange*."

Then, she winked at Sirius before stepping into the Floo and departing with a confused Ludo Bagman following after.

Hestia, meanwhile, simply glared at him with her arms folded.

"Might I inquire as to what my sister was talking about, Lord Black?"

He coughed delicately. "Well, you know how you referred earlier to the stories that got bandied around Hufflepuff about how I kept Gwenog's undies as some kind of boorish souvenir after we... you know."

"Go on," Hestia said in an icy tone.

Sirius grimaced and adjusted the collar of his shirt. "Well, it would perhaps be more *accurate* to say that she willingly left her own underwear behind in exchange. She left the room where we, um, *did it* while I was asleep and took my boxers with her. For, um, *her* collection."

He smiled nervously while waiting for Hestia's response. The solicitor stared at him for several long seconds before giving out a long-suffering sigh. She turned and headed back towards Harry to discuss the contract negotiations with Bagman.

"*This* is why I left Wales," she muttered loudly to herself as she exited.

Sirius watched the witch depart and then smiled to himself. His school days dalliance with Gwenog Jones was a fond memory, if in some ways an embarrassing one. After a moment spent in reminiscence of happier days, Sirius headed into the Floo himself.

"Granger Residence!" he shouted before disappearing in a burst of flame.

The Home of Dan Granger

Thirty minutes later

Dan regarded his house-guest dubiously. "You want me to pose as a Squib for the next two weeks? Just so I can accompany my own daughter to a sporting event? Seriously? Is bigotry against us... *Muggles* really that bad?"

Sirius winced. From Dan's emphasis on the word *Muggle*, it was plain that he thought the word itself to be offensive.

"And to be honest, " he thought. *"It kind of is, I reckon. "*

"The issue isn't bigotry per se, Dan," he said aloud. "It's more like... paranoia. The wizards running the World Cup have to balance the fact that they're running the single biggest magical sporting event in the world with the fact that the Statute of Secrecy is the most important magical law in the world. If you say that you're a Squib who was raised abroad and have even a passing understanding of wizarding culture, no one will look twice at you. But if you broadcast the fact that you're a Muggle? At the World Cup? At a minimum, you'll have people looking at you funny the whole time you're there. At worst, someone might panic and try to Obliviate you. Plus, it might risk some kind of diplomatic incident. With the Bulgarian team doing so well, there will be a lot of people there from the Balkan Alliance. They... don't do well with Muggles."

Dan blinked. "The... Balkan Alliance?"

Hermione spoke up. "That would be the political and economic alliance of those Wizarding nations whose territories overlap a number of Eastern European countries, including the the former Soviet Union and several of its satellites, Daddy. I gather they're rather... insular compared

to Britain. Understandably so, I guess, since for them, being a Muggle has meant living for decades under a repressive dictatorship. Outside of Hogsmeade, there are no wizarding settlements in Britain that aren't hidden within Muggle towns and cities. In Bulgaria, it's the other way around. Most wizard-folk live in hidden enclaves as far from Muggle society as they can get. They try not to interact with Muggles at all, and don't think very highly of societies that do."

Her father nodded slowly and finally acquiesced. "Okay, what do I need to do then? Put on one of those dresses like most of the blokes in Diagon Alley wore the last time I went there?"

"They're called robes, Daddy," Hermione said reproachfully.

"And, ironically, you don't!" Sirius added quickly. "The Cup site is on a large open part of the Dartmoor National Forest and is relatively near Muggle towns, so there are strict orders for everyone attending to '*dress Muggle*.' Your normal clothes will be fine."

"Uh-huh," said Dan. "So if I'm dressed like '*a Muggle*,' or at least whatever wizards *think* Muggles dress like-I've *seen* Diagon Alley, after all-then how will I be acting any different from normal?"

"Basically, you'll avoid references to Muggle culture and politics, you won't mention the word '*dentist*,' and if anyone asks how you got to the stadium site, you'll say the eccentric Lord Black hired a Squib of his acquaintance to be his driver."

"Your... driver?" Dan asked in confusion.

"Yeah," Sirius replied sheepishly. "I've sort of been taking advantage of the Muggleborn kid I hired as my personal assistant by making him drive me places. But I'd promised him some time off and then realized I don't have a way to the Cup."

The Muggle looked at him in confusion. "Don't you lot just teleport wherever you want to go?"

"Tele-what?" asked a nonplussed Sirius.

"Wizards call it Apparition, Daddy," Hermione explained. "If they do it under their own power, anyway. There's a similar technique called the Portus Charm, but it has to be cast on physical objects called Portkeys. Unfortunately, Muggles can't use either of those techniques for travel."

"Well, technically, a Muggle could get an experienced wizard to Side-Along Apparate him," she added, "but there's a non-trivial chance of the Muggle losing a body part, so..."

"WHAT?!"

"It's called Splinching," said Sirius gamely as if not discussing a form of mutilation. "Mostly harmless so long as you can find the missing body part and stick it back on. First time I tried Apparating, I lost three toes and an ear, but I was right as rain ten minutes later."

Dan gaped at his guest, while Hermione squinted her eyes shut.

"But *anyway*," the wizard continued. "As it happens, I am unable to travel by those means either. I'm still in recovery from my recent and *totally unjustified* incarceration in Azkaban Prison, a side effect of which was to give me a form of magically-induced claustrophobia. And since both

Apparition and Portkeys cause the physical sensation of being sucked sideways through a drinking straw, I can't use either of them without... well, bad stuff happening."

Dan leaned back in his chair. "So, in other words, in exchange for me driving you to this shindig, you will do me the kind and generous favor of telling me how to be *just enough* of a Squib (which sounds like a racist term to me, if I'm honest) so that no one will realize I'm actually a Muggle (which *also* sounds like a racist term to me)."

"Yes! Exactly!" Sirius exclaimed while totally ignoring the Squib-slash-Muggle's comments about wizarding racism.

Dan gave Sirius a long baleful look before glancing over to Hermione and taking in her hopeful expression. He sighed.

"Alright. But *you're* paying for the petrol there and back! And in *Muggle money* !"

Sirius waved his hand dismissively. "Not a problem, Dan. Not a problem at all. I mean, it's just from London to Dartmoor and back. How much could it cost? A thousand pounds at most, right?"

Dan stared at the other man for a few seconds before smiling. "Yeah, I reckon that should about cover it."

15 August 1994

The Quidditch World Cup Quarterfinals

Despite his first impression of Sirius Orion Lord Black ("Please, just call me Sirius!"), Dan Granger took a shine to the man over the course of the four-hour drive to Dartmoor. Not only could Dan drive, he had a luxury SUV that he'd

purchased over his wife's objections for all the camping expeditions he'd wanted to go on but never found the time. Sirius rode shotgun-which also required Dan to explain what "shotgun" meant in this context-while Hermione rode in the back. On the drive, when he wasn't fiddling excitedly with the power windows, Sirius explained what Dan's "backstory" would be. He also answered Dan's many questions about wizarding culture, albeit in ways that frequently made Hermione cringe. Granted, Dan had already learned the year before about little details like "marriage contracts" and so didn't drive off the road in a fury when the topic came up by happenstance. But he still was more than a little dubious about whether Wizarding Britain was still someplace he wanted his little girl to vanish off into some day.

The trio left early that morning and arrived at noon. To everyone's surprise, there was a designated parking area, though it only had three other cars. They were met by a dour Muggle by the name of Roberts who seemed delighted to meet Mr. Granger and his daughter ("First *normal* looking people I've seen in days!" he exclaimed), though he did give a jaundiced eye to Sirius's long hair and asked if he was "one of them hippies!"

Sirius blinked. "I... don't think so?"

"Don't mind him, Mr. Roberts," Daniel said forcefully. "This is my nephew. His mother sent him to Cambridge, and now he has dreams of being a stand-up comedian."

"Ah !" Roberts nodded knowingly. "Well, I'm sure he'll shape up once he gets older."

With that, Dan paid Mr. Roberts thirty pounds (of Sirius's money) to leave his SUV here for the duration. Then, he led an amused Hermione and a befuddled Sirius towards the

campsite. Once they'd passed a certain invisible boundary, Dan stopped and gasped. From a distance, the campsite had looked like the sort of grounds one might expect at the FIFA World Cup. But then, suddenly, everything shimmered for a second only to be replaced with a veritable city of tents like something out of a Middle Eastern bazaar. Indeed, some of the tents were truly massive two-story affairs. Sirius had warned Dan that upwards of 100,000 wizards and witches were expected to attend, and now, the Muggle could certainly believe it.

"How will we ever find what we're looking for?" he asked.

"Easily, Daddy," Hermione said before pointing off in the distance. "Just look for the one with the flag that says BMW!"

Dan did a double-take when he looked in the direction his daughter had pointed. For indeed, one of the biggest tents he could see in the distance had a banner-like flag sticking out of the top that waved in the breeze while bearing the letters BMW.

"What? Like the car company?" he asked in confusion.

"I wish," Sirius replied. "Stands for Black, Malfoy, and Wilkes. Our three houses decided to go in on a tent together."

"Blimey! You call that *a tent*?! It's bigger than my house!"

Sirius laughed. "You think that's impressive, Dan? Wait until we get inside! Then, I'll introduce you to the miracle of Spatial Expansion Charms!"

"And what does that mean, dare I ask?" the Muggle inquired suspiciously.

"It means, my friend, that the inside is big enough for each of us to get his or her own room!"

"SIRIUS!" cried out a nearby voice with a Scouse accent that caused the trio to turn. "Uh, I mean, Mr. Black! Er, Lord Black, I guess!"

Sirius turned and grinned. It was Marcus Flint in his Auror Trainee robes.

"Marcus! Good to see you, lad! And it's *Sirius* to you, got it?"

"Yes sir. I mean, yes, Sirius." The young man grinned and shook Sirius's hand before giving Hermione a friendly nod. Then he turned to Dan, and Sirius quickly introduced him.

"Dan, this is Marcus Flint, a future Auror. That's what we call... well, policemen... sort of. Anyway, he's also a fine young man I'm proud to know. Marcus, this is Daniel Granger, Hermione's father."

Marcus moved to shake the older man's hand when the significance of the introduction hit him. He turned to Sirius in confusion.

"But if he's Hermione's dad, doesn't that mean he...?"

"Yep," Sirius replied with a grin before putting his finger over his lips. "Shhh, though. He's here undercover."

Marcus blinked. "Is... is that... legal?" Then, he shook his head. "Ya know what? Nobody's told me it's *il* legal, so I'm not gonna worry about it." Then, he shook Dan's hand without reservation. "Welcome to the Quidditch World Cup, sir! I hope you enjoy yourself!"

"By the way, Marcus," Sirius continued. "I'm a bit surprised to see you here and in uniform. You've only been in the program for a few weeks, haven't you?"

"Yeah, but they pulled in everyone they could for this. Apparently, Fudge, Bones, and Yaxley looked into things and found out that neither Bagman nor Crouch had allocated any money for security. Just one poor sap whose job was to keep that Muggle what owns the land Obliviated every time he gets suspicious. So they reassigned every Auror and Trainee they could to patrol the place in shifts. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. I was scheduled to spend the next week freezing my arse off while pulling monitor duty in some little Scottish hick town called Thurso. They also deputized half the DMLE and assigned them to temporary field duty, so now we've got a bunch of duffers from the Department of Intoxicating Substances running around like they're bloody Hit wizards. The Ministry also put up a huge network of Notice-Me-Not Charms so that the poor Muggle bloke wouldn't notice wizards acting like fools."

Then, he looked rather quizzically at Dan. "They don't seem to be affecting you though, Mr. Granger."

"My father has Squib heritage," Hermione explained. "He can see through most forms of Muggle-Repelling Charms."

"Oh, well that's alright then," Marcus replied. Dan frowned but said nothing.

"Anyway, I need to get back to my patrol so I can clock out in time to see Egypt clobber Luxembourg. Gooooo Sphinxes!" he said, finishing with a pro-Egyptian cheer.

Sirius laughed. "You're a fan of Egypt, Marcus?"

"Eh, not really. I just hate Luxembourg, which all right-thinking people do. Worse than the bloody Australians, and that's saying something!"

Then, the Auror trainee gave a jaunty wave before heading off into the crowd, while the trio continued on towards the BMW tent. Halfway there, Hermione was surprised to hear a familiar voice calling out.

"CORNISH PASTIES! GET YOUR CORNISH PASTIES! FRESH AND HOT!"

Hermione moved ahead of the two men and led them towards a nearby stall adorned with a large sign saying "MOLLY'S MAGICAL MORSELS" with a large crowd in front of it clamoring for food. In addition to Cornish pasties, the booth also offered "*German Frankfurters*," "*Egyptian Shawarma*," and "*American Hamburgers (Warning: does not contain ham)*," as well as several other examples of "fairground food" representative of the competing nations. She wondered idly what sort of street vendor food was associated with Luxembourg but was soon distracted by the red-haired, freckled boy who was loudly hawking Molly's wares.

"JIM?!" she yelled in surprise.

"What?!" the magically gingerfied Jim Potter responded in denial. "No, no! My name is Barny! Barny Weasley! I'm Ron's cousin from Liverpool!" Then, he grinned madly.

"Oh, are you?" she replied with amusement. "Yes, I can tell from your thick Liverpudlian accent."

"Friend of yours, Hermione?" Dan asked as he and Sirius drew near. Jim's eyes widened at the sight of the powerful wizard who'd sworn a magical enmity against his entire

family. The witch looked back and forth between Sirius and the suddenly nervous Boy-Who-Lived.

"Oh... no, Daddy," she lied quickly. "This is my friend Ron's... cousin Barny. I thought he looked like someone else at first."

"Barny Weasley, huh?" said Sirius with narrowed eyes. Jim gulped. Then, Sirius abruptly shrugged and looked up at the board. "Let me try one of those shawarma things."

Ten minutes later, the trio finally arrived at the BMW tent, where Lucius Malfoy was on hand to greet them, immaculate in his robes of black and silver brocade.

"Miss Granger," he said silkily. "A pleasure to see you again. And you must be Mr. Granger, Lord Black's distant Squib cousin. Or something along those lines."

"Um, yeah, that's me. Everybody's favorite Squib cousin."

Dan found himself unaccountably awed by Malfoy's presence. Sure, he'd spent plenty of time over the last two days with Sirius. But while Sirius Black was a wizard, Lucius Malfoy was *a wizard*, perhaps the very first magical being who Dan had met that he felt might be both inclined and able to turn him into a toad. He glanced around nervously.

"So... are those real peacocks?"

To all

All targets have arrived. Target 2 is in disguise, albeit poorly.

Direction

Nimrod

Targets 4, 5, and 6 are all staying with my former husband. You may consider him an unofficial Target 7 if the opportunity presents. Do not share that with the others, darling.

Direction

Thurso, Scotland

10:30 p.m.

"And that concludes Day 7 of the 422nd Quidditch World Cup, with an exciting 380-250 victory for Luxembourg over Egypt! The Wizarding Wireless Network's Cup coverage will continue tomorrow with the special exhibition match featuring Britain's own Tutshill Tornados taking on the Toyohashi Tengu from Japan! Then, on Wednesday, quarterfinals competition will resume with Ireland taking on Transylvania! Hopefully, those plucky lads and lasses from Eire can avenge their English cousins for last week's humiliation at the hands of the Transylvanian team. Until then, this is Smash McLaggen of the Wizarding Wireless Network signing off! "

With an idle flick of his wand, Peter Pettigrew turned off the Wireless. Then, he resumed his study of the ancient papyrus resting on the table before him by the light of both his wand's Lumos and the full moon overhead. A white rat named Socrates was perched on his shoulder. Presently, both Pettigrew and Socrates were about five miles outside Thurso proper. His attention was split between practicing an incantation written in Apophic Egyptian, a magical language that had been dead before Rome was a city, and making sure his new friends were both contained and fed.

The Death Eater shivered slightly before casting another Warming Charm on himself. If he'd had his druthers, he'd be practicing for his part in the plan somewhere indoors and better lit. But after his *last* visit to Thurso, he decided it was best to oversee things personally. Pettigrew yawned and shook his head before pouring himself another cup of coffee from the Muggle thermos he'd brought with him. He also fished a cracker out of his coat pocket and fed it to Socrates before resuming his studies. It was difficult to concentrate, however, what with the sound of bones crunching and flesh tearing from nearby.

Suddenly, there was a pop from nearby. It was Rookwood, who paused only briefly and without fear when the half-dozen werewolves nearest his arrival point pulled themselves away from the dead cow they were devouring to focus on the scent of manflesh. The largest of them turned fully in Rookwood's direction and prepared to spring.

"NO!" Pettigrew snapped without looking up from the papyrus. "You have your food already! You will eat what I've given you!"

The alpha wolf snarled angrily in Pettigrew's direction which finally caused the Animagus to look up. He scowled at the disobedient creature before slashing his hand with his wand and flinging a spatter of blood in its direction.

"Obey!" Peter snarled. The werewolf sniffed the air before bowing its head submissively and turning back towards the dead cow. Rookwood observed all of that impassively.

"You're quite sure they're under control?" he asked. "You'll need a Blood Replenishing Potion at this rate."

Peter snorted. "I don't have the bond with them that I had with Fenrir's pack, but I can control them. Besides, it's only

for tonight. After the full moon is over, they'll do what we want because we pay them if nothing else."

The older wizard nodded. "Good. All targets are in place by now. Everyone is in position."

Peter's face grew sullen. "I still don't think Nimrod is up to fulfilling his assignment. Honestly, I doubt he's a match for *Harry Black*, let alone *Sirius*. "

"The assignment is his. I know you want revenge on both of them, but you have your own task, one far more important than Nimrod's. The Blacks and the Wilkes girl are merely targets of opportunity, after all."

He glanced down at the papyrus. "And speaking of your assignment, how's your Apophic coming?"

"I've pretty much got the incantation down, but I'm still trying to wrap my head around the ritual itself. It's a Selwyn ritual, and you know what those are like. Gory and unsettling. But I'll be ready when the time comes."

Rookwood grimaced. "You'd better be, Peter. You must be able to perform your part of the ritual flawlessly when the stars come into alignment on the night of the 27th. You're the only one who can do it."

Pettigrew sighed. "I *know*, Gus. But in case you've forgotten, I'm also the only one can do all *this*," he said while gesturing towards the surprisingly docile werewolf pack.

"True, but they are but a diversion and are expendable. *You*, my friend, are irreplaceable. If you fail to perform the ritual properly, Peter, everything we've been planning will be set back for *years*. And I... I will not be able to protect you."

The Animagus looked up fondly at his mentor. "It's okay, Gus. Everything will go fine. Don't worry."

And by the light of the full moon, Peter Pettigrew's face broke out into a broad grin.

"I *am* his greatest servant, after all."

Next: Chaos at the QWC Finals!

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2: The part of Alexander McAvity will be played by Colin Mochrie. The part of the mysterious Delpini White will be played by Maisie Williams (specifically, as in her performance as "Me" in the Doctor Who episode "Heaven Sent").

AN3 (What the Sinister Man is reading):

The Merging by Shaydrall has updated after a long hiatus. Squib by dhulli has as well, as has All in the Family by bookhater. Also, there's a new story. Peter Pettigrew and the Deathly Hallows by AverageFish is an odd but interesting redemption fic in which a surprisingly likeable and penitent Peter dies and his soul merges with that of an apparently autistic 5-year-old Harry Potter.

AN4: Special thanks to my Discord editors: BlueWater5, Bob, casewobble, Eclipse, EssayOfThoughts | Aich, FeatheryMinx,

GentCrowCruisin' (Gods of Irony), Jennifer the Green Chaos Duck, justanother randomhuman, kean, Krisni, Mr. Z, Nemo's Flower Song, ProfessionalDragonslayer, Rubric of Ahriman, Sakkiko, SiriusBarkingMad, The Green Pyromancer, and TNT. Thanks, guys!

AN5: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 16,432. Followers: 17,304. Favorites: 15,507. Communities: 239. Discord followers: 4205! Go Team POS!

The Quidditch World Cup, part 3

Chapter 10: The Quidditch World Cup, part 3

Check out www.thesinisterman.com for links to my original fiction. Check out the Sinister Man's Discord to discuss all of my fanfic and original work with other fans.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.

Harry Black

and the Resurrection Game

Chapter 10: The Quidditch World Cup (Pt 3)

The boy lay in his bed dreaming a strange dream. A disturbing dream and yet one with an odd familiarity. But above all, a dream from which he could not awaken.

In the boy's dream, he was in a chair near a roaring fireplace. Odder still, the chair seemed unusually large, as did everything else in the room. But then, the boy suddenly realized the truth. The chair and the room were normal-sized, but he was somehow *small*, much smaller than he should have been. The boy wondered at this in confusion, for he soon realized that he was not actually sitting in the chair

but rather was *being held* by someone who was sitting in the chair. Someone who he couldn't see, for his head would not turn the way he wanted it to. But he knew one thing. Whoever was holding him like he was a babe in his mother's arms... was *very, very, cold*.

"Report," said the boy in a raspy yet sibilant voice so unlike his own and yet so familiar. "Miss Direction?"

An incredibly beautiful woman spoke first. She also seemed familiar, though in his dreaming haze, the boy could not put a name to the face.

"I have confirmed that Chevenoir is no more. While it grieves me to have lost the great citadel of my ancestors, it also means there is no chance of anyone interfering with that aspect of the plan. The Devil's Tor will be unattended. Indeed, with the manse itself destroyed, the ley lines which once powered it have reset themselves to their original course. The Devil's Tor is more magically active than it has been in over a thousand years. Ideal for our needs."

The boy nodded imperiously. "And Mr. January?"

"I have conveyed him to the site personally, and he has mapped out its coordinates. He will have a reversible Portkey available well before the moment it is needed."

"Good, good. This also means, does it not, that killing Sirius Black is no longer *essential* to our plans? No matter how *desirable* you might consider it?"

The woman hesitated. "It is as you say, my Lord, though it may still be necessary since he will no doubt try to protect his Heir from us."

The boy nodded. "It matters little. Advise Mr. Nimrod that the Wilkes children are his primary objective. Kill Sirius Black if he presents himself as a target of opportunity, but not if it endangers his main goal."

"It shall be done, my Lord."

"Mr. Misericorde?"

A man in a long brown coat stepped forward and bowed respectfully to the boy.

"Security arrangements have been ordered according to our specifications. DMLE personnel assigned to the campgrounds have been briefed to expect violence from the Australians. More importantly, the personnel specifically assigned to that sector were chosen for their temperament and the likelihood that they will exacerbate any conflict rather than resolve it. Our people at the *Daily Prophet* will focus their reporting on inflaming nationalist fervor while spreading as much anti-McAvity propaganda as they can get away with. Through third parties, we have used a mixture of bribery, blackmail, and mind control to suborn Crick, Schultz, Chavez, and Gunnersdottir to ensure that they will act as needed leading up to the finals."

"You have done well, Mr. Misericorde... in most things. But I have one additional thing I need from you."

"Anything, my Lord."

"Your badge of office. Leave it on the table when you depart."

"My... badge? My Lord, I do not..."

Instantly, a wand sitting on a nearby end table leaped into the boy's tiny hand.

"CRUCIO! "

The man in the long coat dropped to the ground screaming. The curse lasted just under two seconds before the boy released it, but the man's agony lasted far longer. From somewhere beneath the boy, a soft yet deep and resonant "*Ki-ki-ki!*" could be heard as a snake of some kind registered its amusement at the man's suffering. A very *big* snake. Far from being alarmed by this, the boy shared the snake's pleasure at the man's pitiful weeping.

"There are those among my Inner Circle, Mr. Misericorde, whose insights and opinions are so valued that I will permit them to question me. You are not one of them. Do you understand?"

"I... Y-yes, m-m-my Lord," the man said from the floor. "P-please for-for-forgive my impertinence."

With obvious difficulty, he pulled himself up off the floor and removed a gold badge from his lapel, which he then placed on a nearby table. Then, he moved to stand next to a young woman who sneered at him contemptuously.

"Miss Vespertine?"

That same woman stepped forward and then snapped her fingers. From outside of the boy's field of view a man stepped forward. He wore a white robe that came down to his knees with a belt cinched at the waist. Below that were white breeches tucked into white boots, while his head was covered by a plain white hood and a featureless mask the color of bone.

"This is the uniform which our people will be wearing, though its base features will not be so apparent. Behold!"

She tapped her wand to the man's shoulder, and instantly, the featureless white ensemble changed shape and color until the man appeared to be wearing wizarding robes of lime green and canary yellow, with a black balaclava mask covering his face. On his chest were three black letters, two uppercase separated by one in lower case: McA. She tapped the man's shoulder again, and his clothing changed once more, with the robes darkening to a rusty brown and then reshaping into an Auror's long coat. The balaclava morphed into a fedora, but the face beneath it was not revealed but instead remained covered in shadow. Then, she touched him a third time, and the entire ensemble darkened further until it was jet black, while the fedora changed into a pointed hood over a terrifying skull-like mask.

The uniform of a Death Eater.

"How will you determine which combatant will be dressed appropriately when the attack begins? Not all of them will be wizards after all."

"We need not bother, my Lord," the young woman said with a smile. "While a loyal wizard will be able to change his uniform's appearance with the touch of his wand to the form of his choice, for those who are either acting under the Imperius or who are mercenaries-whether wizard, Muggle or... otherwise-the uniform has an additional function. Witnesses will perceive it as taking whichever form the onlookers would fear the most, whether a Death Eater, an Auror, or... an *Australian Muggleborn hooligan*. "

She smirked at that last remark before continuing.

"Naturally, all the Muggles we have enslaved for this mission

will appear as Australians, since they will be wielding Muggle weapons instead of wands. And there is one final innovation, my Lord. Each uniform will have a Portkey sewn into its material. When the signal is given, every one of our people will be transported away from the campsite to an appropriate location."

"An... *appropriate* location, Miss Vespertine?" the boy said with some amusement.

She chuckled demurely, but there was no mistaking the cruelty beneath her good humor.

"Yes, my Lord. Those who we deem loyal or of value to the Cause will be conveyed to one of several safehouses across Wizarding Britain. Those we deem expendable-including all the Muggles, naturally-will be sent to a particular spot in the North Sea about ten miles off the coast... and 200 feet below the surface!"

The snake laughed again, and this time, the boy joined him, gasping out a strange sibilant "*ki-ki-ki* " to show his mirth.

"Ingenious, Miss Vespertine. You are a credit to your family. Please convey my appreciation to your Grandfather when next you see him."

She smiled and bowed respectfully.

"And finally, Mr. Norvegicus."

Another man stepped forward, one who the boy recognized at once.

"Nearly everything is ready, my Lord. I am fully confident that I can perform the ritual when the time is right. My werewolves will play their part. I am in communication with

Mr. January, and we have the timing planned out to the last second. The only thing that remains is the final ingredient for the potion."

The boy nodded. "Mr. Nemo, are you quite certain there is no more information to be wrung from our guest?"

"Quite so," said yet another man who stepped forward while half-carrying a pitiful-looking woman with a vacant expression and a trail of drool leading down from the corner of her mouth. He dropped the woman to the floor, and she immediately collapsed into a fetal position while weeping softly. "There is nothing left to be gained from further interrogation."

"And you are sure, Mr. Norvegicus, that the final ingredient for your potion can be harvested *posthumously*?"

"The effect will last longer if it is still beating when removed, my Lord, but for our purposes, it need only be taken while the body is still warm."

The boy snorted contemptuously. "Well then, let us kill two birds with one stone, shall we?"

He pointed his wand at the woman on the floor.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The boy shot up in his cot with a loud gasp. His whole body was shaking and drenched with sweat. Suddenly, someone nearby cast a Lumos Charm, and a bright light instantly illuminated a small room contained within a magical Expandable Tent. The boy's best friend who had cast the spell sat up in his own cot and stared at him blearily.

"Ron?" asked Jim Potter. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Ron Weasley stared at the Boy-Who-Lived and struggled to answer. But now that he was fully awake, the details of the strange dream, which had been so vivid when he was in its grip, had already begun to fade, leaving only flashes of images for him to recall. That, and a strange inexplicable dread. He took a deep shuddering breath.

"It's... nothing, Jim," Ron finally said. "Just a bad dream. Nothing to worry about. I'm sorry I woke you."

"Well, okay. But let's try to get back to sleep. We've got a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

Jim extinguished the Lumos and lay back down on his cot. Ron did the same and pulled the blanket tighter around himself as if to ward off a chill. He closed his eyes, but it was some time before sleep came once more.

17 August 1994

The Quidditch World Cup, Day Nine

On Wednesday, Harry slept in. The night before had been an exciting exhibition match between the Tutshill Tornados and the Bigonville Bombers from Luxembourg. Exciting but *long*, as the Snitch evaded capture until nearly midnight and it had been after two o'clock in the morning when he'd finally made it to bed. During the course of the ten-hour long match, Draco explained to Harry why there was such widespread antipathy towards Luxembourg and its Quidditch teams.

"Basically, Luxembourg was always a small nation with an even smaller wizarding population, but by the end of the

Grindelwald War, it was literally down to fewer than two dozen wizards in the whole country. At which point, this incredibly rich bloke from India calling himself the Kumar Pasha essentially *bought the country*. Or at least all the magical bits of it."

"Okay," Harry answered. "So it's just bigotry against a non-European wizard coming in and buying a European country?"

"No," Draco continued. "No one would have cared what some rich foreigner wanted to blow his Galleons on... *except* the Pasha's son and Heir was really into Quidditch. So, starting in the 1960s, he brought in enough wizardfolk to live in Luxembourg to justify the country having its own national team. And then, he started poaching talented players from all over the world, offering them lots of Galleons just to move to Luxembourg and play Quidditch for him. Despite being one of the smallest nations on Earth, Luxembourg has been a QWC contender since 1968 and has won the Cup three times. And *every one* of its players in those championship seasons was actually born in another country and *bribed* into moving to Luxembourg just to compete. And *then*, to add insult to injury, the Pasha started his own private club, the Bigonville Bombers, and staffed them the same way, basically buying his way into a top-tier league team that's won the Western European Cup eight times in the last twenty years! It's no wonder everyone hates them!"

As he retired for the evening, Harry filed that information away. He knew the current Kumar Pasha, Shakti Kumar (the "Pasha" title he and his forefathers insisted on using was a meaningless hereditary title dating back to before the Statute of Secrecy), only vaguely and even then only because Parvati Patil was in a marriage contract with his son Sanjeev. The previous summer-back when they were still on

speaking terms-Jim had given Harry the outline of that bit of domestic drama, and he'd described Sanjeev Kumar as "Draco Malfoy in a turban." Not that there was anything wrong with turbans so long as they weren't used to conceal possessing Dark Lords, of course.

In any case, a lie-in the next morning seemed appropriate as he'd been invited to ten o'clock brunch with the Abbott family. Or more accurately, the Abbotts, the Greengrasses, and the Cresswells. Harry knew nothing about the Cresswells beyond Dirk Cresswell being in the papers several months earlier for displaying what the *Daily Prophet* called "unusual heroism and resourcefulness for a Muggleborn" during Peter Pettigrew's infamous rat-plagued escape from the Ministry the previous Spring. Also, he understood Hannah Abbott's mother was Dirk's younger sister.

Accompanying Harry to the Abbott tent were Sirius, Regulus (disguised as Archie Goodwin), Amy, Neville, and Theo. Hermione begged off, saying that she and Dan would be staying at the tent with the Malfoys until it was time for that afternoon's Ireland-Transylvania match. Harry was only mildly surprised. While Lucius Malfoy was initially polite but cool towards Hermione's Muggleborn father, Dan had mentioned in passing that he'd played cricket in his student days back at King's College. The elder Malfoy's demeanor changed at once, and the two spent over an hour discussing the current state of British cricket to the embarrassment of both Hermione and Draco.

Still, Harry had thought that Hermione might prefer spending some time with fellow witches her own age, but the Muggleborn was *decidedly* opposed to the idea of visiting the Greengrasses. Harry resolved to talk with her later and see if she was still holding a grudge against

Daphne over the Hogwarts Cultural Preservation Society and its rivalry with SPAM or if there was something else going on.

"Are you sure you want me along?" Theo had asked.

"Definitely," Harry replied. "This meeting is about strengthening our alliance. But we both saw how the CPS evolved from an 'anti-Outcast' group into more of an 'anti-Muggleborn' group despite their claims otherwise. If we're going for closer ties with the Greengrasses, I want to know what their real feelings about blood purity are."

"Uh-huh," said the other boy. "And you want to use *the Outcast* as a stalking horse in the process."

"Uh, yeah?" Harry replied. "Is that a problem?"

"No, no," said Theo. "I just wanted to hear you say it. And to be honest, I'm kind of looking forward to seeing how Daphne reacts to me getting Outcast cooties all over the place."

Later...

To Theo's disappointment, neither Daphne nor Astoria seemed at all discomfited by his presence. Of course, neither were they at all apologetic for their attitudes towards him over the previous school year. Like Cedric Diggory, they both seemed to take the position that Magic had condemned Theo as an Outcast but then Magic later exonerated him, and so all was right with the world.

What was *interesting* to Harry about seeing the Greengrass sisters casually dismiss everything as water under the bridge was the reaction of both Hannah Abbott and Tracey Davis. The two witches-both Halfbloods, if Harry remembered correctly-glanced towards one another as

Daphne spoke about her hopes for the CPS in the coming year now that "Theo's unpleasantness" was resolved. A distinct undercurrent of worry passed between them both in response to Daphne and Astoria's views about the Ultimate Sanction.

Despite that, the Abbotts were perfectly amiable hosts, and over brunch, they presented themselves as the model example of a liberal Pureblood family, respectful of wizarding traditions but fully open to equal rights for Muggleborns and legal protections for Squibs raised within wizarding society. Gilbert Abbott, the head of the family, gushed with appreciation for their in-laws among the Muggleborn Cresswell family, and if Dirk and Pamela Cresswell had any qualms about being held up as token Muggleborns, they hid them well.

The group also chatted pleasantly about wizarding politics, and for the most part, their political views meshed well with those of Harry's alliance. His *official* political alliance that was. Whether they would be welcome in the Azkabal was quite another matter, and in any case, that particular conspiracy was already probably too big for its own good. The only discordant note came when Alexander McAvity's name came up at one point. The Abbotts and Greengrasses were unanimous in their disdain for the Muggleborn Dark Lord, and it seemed that Daphne had picked up her famous hostility towards McAvity from her parents. Understandable, perhaps, considering that Daniel Greengrass's father and predecessor as Lord Greengrass had died in one of the terrorist attacks attributed to McAvity's movement after his expulsion.

For his part, Harry took the opportunity to broach an uncomfortable topic of his own.

"Mr. Abbott, I had a question about a member of your family: your nephew, Lester Abbott, who's one of those Hit Wizards in St. Mungo's with seemingly irreversible curse damage."

Gilbert Abbott's expression went stony, while several of the other Abbotts stiffened. "Go on, Lord Wilkes," Gilbert said slowly.

"I've followed the news reports about what happened to him and the other Hit Wizards. I gather the cursed toy that harmed them was one created by the Toymaker, who was also my predecessor as Lord of House Wilkes."

Gilbert nodded. "It was. But I assure you, Lord Wilkes, that none of us blame you or your house for the actions of a distant and deranged relative. You have nothing to apologize for."

Harry nodded. "I appreciate that, but I wasn't going to apologize so much as perhaps offer a possible avenue for treatment."

Gilbert's eyebrows rose as Harry continued.

"I know that the Healers haven't been able to reverse the curse that's on your nephew or the others. Alastor Moody was one of my tutors last year, and he told me that You-Know-Who could also cast curses that St. Mungo's couldn't reverse. Moody theorized that it was because You-Know-Who cast the curses in Parseltongue. I've read that the specific cursed toy that Pettigrew used was based on a snake design, and I was wondering if it was possible that, I don't know, maybe You-Know-Who was involved in creating those toys and he incorporated Parseltongue into the magic?"

"Perhaps so, Harry," said Sam Abbott, Gilbert's son, who was also a Junior Auror, "but I don't see what the importance is."

"Well, the importance, I think, is that if the curse can't be broken by the Healers because it uses Parseltongue, maybe it needs another Parselmouth to break it instead."

The Abbott patriarch's eyes lit up. "One such as your brother? The Boy-Who-Lived?"

Harry coughed. "Well, I was going to suggest a foreign Parselmouth Healer named Bhaskar Gupta who treated Jim last summer. And Jim's not exactly my brother anymore. But he'd be the best one to reach out to Healer Gupta, I suppose, since they know each other. If you do approach Jim about it, I'd prefer it if you left my name out of it though."

Several of those present who were related to the poor cursed Hit Wizard became quite excited, and after brunch was over, Gilbert and Sam both made their apologies and Apparated to St. Mungo's while the rest of the group left for the stadium. With a subtle hint, Harry had Theo and Amy distract the Greengrass sisters while Harry walked with Hannah Abbott and Tracey Davis. He'd known the blonde Slytherin since the night of their Sorting, but the red-headed Hufflepuff was a bit of a mystery.

"Do you really think my Uncle Lester can be cured?" Hannah asked hopefully.

"I don't know, but I definitely hope so." He turned towards Tracey. "So, what do you two think about all these political maneuvers?"

Tracey shrugged. "Well, I hope you will consider Aunt Winnie's proposal. But I'm only a ward of House Greengrass, so I really don't have a dog in the hunt."

"Obviously," added Hannah, "I'll benefit from being the daughter of a Noble House even though there's no way I'll

be the Heir if it happens. But I just think it would be wonderful to really be a part of wizarding society. I mean, you don't *have* to be a part of elite Pureblood culture to be successful nowadays, but obviously, it doesn't *hurt*. "

"That's an interesting viewpoint, Hannah, coming from a member of the Cultural Preservation Society," Harry said slyly.

Hannah winced. "To be honest, I only got involved in that because Cedric sold me on '*learning more about my heritage*' " and all that. Plus he's..."

"Absurdly handsome?" Tracey supplied mischievously.

"Merlin!" Harry exclaimed with a huff. "I think every girl I know must have discovered hormones at the same time! Can we not get into a discussion about which guys you both think are good-looking?"

"If you insist," Hannah replied with a laugh. "Though I was hoping you might give me some pointers for asking Neville to go with me to a Hogsmeade weekend."

Harry had a coughing fit, and the Hufflepuff laughed.

"Shall I warn Neville that's he's also on the *Hufflepuff Most Desirable List*?" he finally asked.

Hannah blushed, but Tracey just snorted. "I'd be more curious as to which Slytherins are on it, if I were you, Harry. With Flint graduated finally and Draco moved to Durmstrang, it's pretty much you and Cassius Warrington that are beginning to draw attention from the witches of Hogwarts."

The boy looked gobsmacked. "I genuinely don't know how to take that. Me and... *Warrington* ?!"

"Don't take it the wrong way, Harry," the blonde Slytherin said. "You've filled out rather nicely over the years and have always been popular. And it helps that you're richer than Midas and the youngest Lord in centuries. For Warrington, on the other hand, good looks and the Heirship of a minor Noble House are pretty much his sole redeeming features. And even then, he's only good-looking when he remembers not to scowl or sneer. His father's like that. Antonius Warrington has the dubious distinction of being the first Wizengamot Lord to make the cover of *Witch Weekly* in decades."

The wizard did a double take. "Antonius Warrington made the cover of *Witch Weekly* ?"

Tracey nodded with a smirk. "Until he married Cassius's mother, he was considered '*a highly eligible young bachelor* .' And he's still considered very handsome... at least until he opens his mouth. I've had some fun tweaking Cassius about it in CPS meetings. Cassius is a complete jerk most of the time, but at least he's not actually vain about his looks. Not like some people I know, *Mr. Sleekeazy* !"

"Yeah, well," Harry said with a laugh. "If you've got it, flaunt it."

"Ahem!" Hannah interrupted good-naturedly, "To get back on topic, I was *going* to say that Cedric is... well, really influential in our House. Yeah, he's good-looking, but it's more than that. For as long as I've been a Hufflepuff, he's been the guy everyone listens to and respects. He's really smart and amazing on a broom, but also charismatic as hell. People are already predicting he'll be Head Boy year after

next because no one else in his year is even close, and they're wondering if he could end up as Minister of Magic someday. And when he tries to talk you into something, it's hard to say no. Anyway, he sold me on joining the CPS so I could learn more about actual Pureblood traditions and history, since my family hopes to join the Wizengamot someday. I mean, our family is mostly Pureblooded, but my dad's a Squib and my mother is a Muggleborn, so I think I need all the connections I can make. I just wasn't expecting the CPS to be so..."

"So what?" Harry asked, surprised at her hesitation.

Tracey looked around to make sure none of the Greengrasses were nearby. "So creepily obsessed with Theo No-Name and later so hostile to Muggleborns in general."

Tracey's blunt comment caught Harry off-guard, and before he could respond, she changed the topic. "And speaking of student organizations, is SPAM supposed to be a pro-Muggleborn, anti-Pureblood group? Or is it really interested in '*preventing abusive magic*' like the name says?"

Harry blinked. "Bit of both, actually. Why?"

She hesitated. "Because just between us, I was... uncomfortable with how the Ultimate Sanction played with everybody's heads last year. I love Daphne and Astoria like sisters, but it was kind of frightening watching them get swept up in it like that. It kind of gave me a feel for how so many people got taken in by the Death Eaters back in the day."

"But not you?"

"Not either of us, really," Hannah said. "Neither of us have any close relatives under any sort of Ministry oaths, at least

none on par with a Wizengamot Oath, so we were only slightly affected by the Ultimate Sanction. It was more like we just got... caught up in the emotions. I feel like I should apologize to Theo for being in a group that was so down on him."

"I'm sure he would happily accept an apology," Harry said noncommittally before turning back to Tracey. "And you? Were you immune to the Sanction as well? Or did your connection to House Greengrass mean you were affected like Daphne?"

Tracey hesitated. "I'm... I wasn't affected because I'm not actually a member of House Greengrass. Being a ward isn't the same thing as being a daughter, you know, even if Uncle Daniel and Aunt Winnie treat me like one in most respects."

"If I may ask, how *did* you become a ward of House Greengrass?"

She chuckled darkly. "You may ask, Harry, but it's not something I'm willing to answer. At least not on a crowded fairground where just anyone can hear."

Harry nodded, and the three of them moved to catch up with the others. They stopped to pick up some memorabilia for the Irish National Team. Having had a large brunch earlier, Harry had no interest in stopping off at *Molly's Magical Morsels*, which was probably best for all concerned in light of who was running the till at the time.

Of course, Harry wasn't the only one playing avoidance games. Once they were in the VIP box, he noticed that Hermione made a point of sitting as far away from the Greengrasses as their private box would allow.

18 August 1994

From the Daily Prophet Sports Page

Final Score: Ireland 310 Transylvania 130

Cup Organizers reject accusations of

pro-Irish favoritism by Referee Henning Schultz

19 August 1994, Day 11

Thursday saw yet another exciting exhibition game between the Appleby Arrows and Germany's Heidelberg Harriers, but Friday was the main event for the week: Bulgaria vs. France. It was also the day Blaise Zabini joined Harry and company in their private box, though only for the day, as he would be returning to Marseilles the next morning. But he was not the only new arrival, for this quarterfinal match also saw the debut of Bulgaria's "*mascots* ." The French team made a spectacular entrance accompanied by a platoon of wizards on winged stallions who waved French flags in one hand while shooting fireworks from their wands with the other. Sadly, they were completely ignored in favor of the hundred beautiful (and scantily clad) women who began to dance sensuously to what Harry assumed was the Bulgarian national anthem.

Harry leaned forward before catching himself. For a brief moment before he could reassert his Occlumency, he felt a wave of pure hypnotic power wash over him. A somewhat familiar one at that. And while he was able to resist, he noticed that Theo and Draco both had to grab hold of Neville before the boy could try to climb over the railing. And he was hardly the only one so affected, as all across the stadium, dozens and dozens of wizards practically frenzied

at the sight of the beautiful dancers, including both Sirius and Regulus! Lucius was not amused by their testosterone-laden antics, and neither was Hermione.

"Honestly," she muttered from the other side of Zabini, "you'd think wizards would be familiar with the concept of *cheerleaders* well enough not to turn into drooling imbeciles at the sight of them!"

Harry was surprised by her apparent resistance to the effect he was actively trying to block with some difficulty. But then, he noticed that only men were affected by the strange attraction. The witches around him were not drawn to the dancers. If anything, most of them were as annoyed by the response of the wizards in attendance as Hermione. And then, he remembered when he'd experienced this strange sense of hypnotic attraction before: it was the same effect that Fleur Delacour had tried to use against him at the French Dueling Tournament just a few months earlier.

"Calm down, Hermione," he said. "After all, it's not their fault... right, Blaise?"

Blaise gave him a cool expression, and while he didn't answer Harry directly, they were both good enough at Legilimency to know what was on each other's minds. While Blaise knew Harry had specific questions about Fleur, they would not be answered here and now. The boy turned to Hermione instead.

"The... *cheerleaders* as you put it are actually Veela, Hermione. The allure they generate is magical and instills an overpowering supernatural desire in any man who falls under its spell, absent Occlumency or... other defenses."

Harry studied the women more closely. "I haven't really studied Veela yet. I think they're NEWT level material since

they're rare and aren't found in Britain."

"True," Blaise said. "The only Veela left in the wild are contained on a special reserve in Bulgaria. There's only a few hundred of them."

"On a reserve?!" Hermione spluttered. "Do you mean those women are... enslaved by the Bulgarian government?"

Blaise gave a sour expression. He should have known that Veela would present a thorny ethical topic with Hermione.

"*Women* is not the word I'd use, Hermione. The common perception of Western Europeans who are unfamiliar with them is that a Veela is a woman of such incredible beauty that it can enslave a man's will. But if angered, a Veela can transform into a terrible and ferocious bird-woman who can shoot fireballs from her hands and tear the flesh from your bones when provoked."

"The common perception?" Harry asked. "I take it the truth is different?"

"More like the exact opposite. A Veela is *actually* a terrible and ferocious bird-woman who can shoot fireballs from her hands... and who can *disguise* herself as a beautiful woman in order to use her hypnotic allure to draw in her prey."

Harry crooked an eyebrow at that, but it was Hermione who spoke.

"Prey? You make them sound like... predatory animals." She glanced back down to the field where the Veelas' synchronized dancing continued to drive the male spectators into a frenzy.

"That's because they are," Blaise continued. "The dancing is an innate skill they have that augments the range of their allure. While Veela are intelligent, it's in *exactly* the same way that Acromantula are intelligent, i.e. smart enough to say hi before they try to eat you. By their very nature, Veela are not capable of looking at human beings except as a food source. And also as breeding stock. Or both, I guess. They reproduce by entrancing human males into sex, which is such an intense experience for the male that it's almost invariably fatal. At which point, the Veela uses her flame-generating powers to roast her lover's body before consuming it."

Both Harry and Hermione looked aghast.

"Wait, so the Bulgarian government sent *cannibal bird-women* to the Quidditch World Cup to act as their mascots?!" Hermione exclaimed.

Blaise shrugged. "Technically, they're not really cannibals since it's not members of their own species they're eating. But otherwise, yeah. The Bulgarians maintain the numbers on the Veela preserve by sending them prisoners convicted of capital crimes for breeding purposes followed by swift consumption. Which sounds awful, but the victim apparently dies in the throes of absolute ecstasy, so it's better than Azkaban, I suppose."

Harry thought back over his friend's words. "Hang on. You said the only Veela *in the wild* are on that Bulgarian preserve. Are there Veela *not* in the wild?"

The boy seemed uncomfortable with the question. "Yeah. Veela are magical creatures, which means that some parts of their bodies have magical applications. Veela hair can make a potent wand core, though Ollivander refuses to use them.

Veela feathers and claws can be used in all sorts of potions. Most infamously, there's a highly illegal potion that requires organs harvested from a live Veela that can make an ordinary witch incredibly beautiful and also give her the benefits of Veela allure. So naturally, there's a thriving black market for Veela, whether dead or alive. And while Veela can't truly interbreed with humans, the term "*half-Veela* " is a slur used in Eastern European nations for a witch who's made use of that potion, or simply a witch who uses her beauty to manipulate men."

Harry and Hermione both stiffened in their seats. Hermione because Blaise had once told her of another kind of half-Veela, one of the magical crossbreeds created by the Dark Witch Lady Echidna who also bred Rubeus and Gunther Hagrid. Harry because he'd been warned by Lucius Malfoy that Narcissa Black Nott possessed a synthetic "Veela allure," presumably from that same potion. He glanced back at Draco who was still remonstrating Neville over the Gryffindor's continuing desire to run down to the field and declare his love for one of the Veela dancers. Or perhaps all of them. Harry wondered if Draco even knew what his own mother had done to herself, let alone how.

Then, a completely different thought occurred to him, and Harry looked up to the top of the stadium which was ringed by Eye-Spies floating in mid-air awaiting the commencement of the match. And despite himself, he couldn't help wondering if the Eye-Spies were also recording the Veela performance, and, if so, what sort of market there might be for it. He only knew that it was an idea he didn't dare mention to Hermione.

As it happened, the Eye-Spies had not recorded the seductive pregame performance. Luckily, however, Bulgaria

defeated France soundly, and so the Veela would be performing again the following Monday before the Bulgaria-Luxembourg semifinal match. The next morning, Harry took the opportunity to suggest recording the Veela to Anthony, Sue, Ginny, and the Weasley Twins. The boys were all for it. Sue Li just glared at them but conceded that there was probably money to be made off "the ingrained sexism of the Patriarchy."

"Besides," said Ginny, "it's a sin to not take advantage of guys who can't keep their hormones in check."

"That's what I just said!" Sue Li responded.

"Yeah," Ginny replied. "But I said it in English."

It was to be a big day for Eye-Spy Productions. Harry's little venture had opened a kiosk (ironically not far from where Molly Weasley had set up her food stand) where the first run of Eye-Spy viewing mirrors would go on sale along with free recordings of the pre-Cup exhibition games by the four British Isle teams. Harry had resigned himself to skipping that afternoon's exhibition between the Holyhead Harpies and the Sweetwater All-Stars from the United States, although he did assure Ginny that she would be allowed to leave in time to watch her favorite team in action. The Slytherin girl was splitting her time between Eye-Spy and "3M" (as the Weasley children had taken to calling their mother's enterprise).

To his astonishment and delight, however, the Eye-Spy booth was shut down in plenty of time to catch the exhibition simply because they had run out of product! The first run of Eye-Spy viewing mirrors had consisted of 100 mirrors priced at 20 galleons each, and they were sold out by noon! Anthony, Sue, Penelope, and Titus would remain at

the booth for the rest of the afternoon, but only to answer questions about the product and to take pre-orders for the company's coverage of the Quidditch World Cup which would be available through owl-order in October. To spur interest, they had rough footage from the last several matches playing constantly on oversized mirrors mounted on the sides of the booth, each of which had a crowd of amazed watchers in front of it. But the rest of the Eye-Spy team members would have the afternoon off to enjoy the exhibition match, especially Ginny, who was wearing a t-shirt with a picture of Gwenog Jones waving a Beater's bat beneath the caption "*No one can beat you as hard as a witch can!*"

As the group left the booth for the stadium, none of them noticed a ginger-headed boy glaring at the large Eye-Spy Productions sign with the heat of a thousand suns.

"Unbelievable," said Jim Potter to himself while on the way back to the 3M booth. "Un-bloody-believable!"

As Harry's group approached the stadium, he noticed a large and somewhat angry group of wizards and witches just outside. They were clustered around a beleaguered QWC official in the area set aside for souvenir booths. In addition to general QWC merchandise, there were individual booths set up for every national team that had made it past the prelims and also every one of the exhibition teams. As Harry passed the Chudley Cannons booth, he had to avert his eyes to avoid being blinded by the horrific orange that covered every inch of it. On drawing closer to the official, he noticed several Ministry personnel on hand to help keep the peace, one of whom Harry knew quite well.

"Ladies and Gentlewizards!" said the QWC official, whose name badge identified him as Carlos Chavez, Director of Merchandising. "I have made my decision. I understand some of you are offended, though honestly, I fail to see why. But there is nothing in the merchandise you are all complaining about that violates QWC guidelines for what can and cannot be sold at the Cup. My decision stands!"

The group around the official made their displeasure known with a round of heavy booing and grumbling which was offset by the sound of cheers and rude remarks from a nearby booth flying the Australian flag. Harry glanced over and immediately realized what the commotion was about. For among the merchandise being sold by the Australians were a number of shirts, jerseys, and even flags that bore their team colors of lime green and canary yellow... along with a large black "McA" logo, presumably added in support of Alexander McAvity.

"Merlin," said George, "the Australians are really rubbing it in everyone's face about McAvity being back in Britain, aren't they!"

Harry agreed that selling merchandise adorned with the symbol of a Dark Lord-even if it was a Dark Lord in name only-seemed unnecessarily provocative on the part of the Australians. But before he could say anything, the crowd was silenced by a round of loud sparks from an Auror's wand.

"Alright, everyone! That's enough!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Chavez has made his decision, and that's that. If you don't like the stuff that the Australians are selling, don't buy any! Otherwise, disperse! Now!"

With some surly grumbling, the crowd did just that, but not before hurling a few insults at the unrepentant Australians. Harry took the opportunity to call out to Tonks before she moved on, and she turned to him with a smile.

"Harry!" she exclaimed brightly. "Good to see you! Have you been enjoying the Cup so far?"

"Yeah, it's been brilliant! Weasleys, this is my cousin..." He paused suddenly. "You know, I don't actually know what to call you right now. Have you made a decision?"

The Auror grinned and related her conversation with Andromeda and Ted the night before.

As the Tonkses sat across the kitchen table from their only daughter, she took a deep breath before making her announcement.

"After careful consideration," she said, "I have decided to adopt the Black surname."

She noticed a brief flash of disappointment on her father's face.

"Are you okay with that, Dad?" she asked hesitantly.

Ted shrugged. "We said it was your decision to make, dear. And I understand how accepting that part of your heritage can open a lot of doors for you going forward. But I have to confess, I'm a little disappointed that the Tonks name is going to die out with me."

She smirked. "Well actually, it's *not*. Not entirely, anyway. I've decided to adopt Tonks as my *first* name since that's

what all my friends have been calling me since I was in Third Year!"

Andromeda scoffed. "Your name is going to be *Tonks Black* ?!"

Tonks raised her chin haughtily. "Actually, it's going to be *Tonks Nymphadora Black*! That way, you can continue to annoy me with it at every opportunity! Consider it an early Christmas present!"

"Right then," said Harry with a laugh. "Weasleys, this is my cousin, Junior Auror Tonks Nymphadora Black! Tonks, these are some of my friends. George Weasley, Fred Weasley, and Ginny Weasley. George is the one with the mole."

"Hey!" the Twins exclaimed in mild outrage.

"Don't let him get away with that, boys!" Tonks said merrily. "I've heard about your reputation as pranksters. Surely you can figure out how to make a fake mole or something!"

Then, she shook her head, and instantly, her hair turned a bright ginger to match the amazed Weasleys, and her face sprouted a large mole in the same location as George's. With a wave, she headed off into the crowd.

"Your cousin is *cool* !" the Twins said in unison.

"Yes," said Harry with pride. "Yes, she is."

To Ginny's delight, the match between the Harpies and the All-Stars turned into a rout, with the all-female Holyhead team utterly dominating their all-male American rivals. While Harry understood Ginny's reaction, he himself was

somewhat bored with the proceedings, as he preferred exciting Quidditch regardless of the genders of the players involved. In fact, the most interesting part of the match came after its conclusion, when he noticed Cassius Warrington and some of his friends exiting the stadium nearby. Cassius snidely (and loudly) said that the Harpies were "alright for a bunch of girls." Cassius didn't realize that Millie Bulstrode was standing just a few feet behind him, not until she called out his name and asked if he wanted another lesson in the "Muggle approach to dealing with loudmouthed jerks," her preferred euphemism for a quick knee to the crotch.

Cassius paled and moved on quickly. Theo and Neville both laughed, while Harry turned to Tracey Davis, who also observed the exchange.

"And *he's* my rival for most fanciable Slytherin?!" he asked with a smirk.

She shrugged. "Eh. He's still good-looking. And then he ruins the effect by opening his mouth."

The next morning...

There were no matches on Sunday, but Harry, Sirius, Lucius, and Augusta met for an hour over breakfast to discuss the Greengrass-Abbott proposal. While they all obviously had reservations about dealing with House Selwyn in any capacity, it was decided that the Abbots would make a good addition to their Wizengamot alliance provided that certain mutual oaths were made. Aside from everything else they brought to the table, having such a progressive House in their alliance might help to divert any negative press

attention to the "unpleasant family histories" of House Black, House Wilkes, and House Malfoy.

"And if nothing else," Lucius said languidly. "I can always *speed up* Uriah Travers' inevitable departure on his next Great Adventure."

"Lucius!" snapped Augusta. "Kindly refrain from comments that might make us all accessories before the fact!"

Meanwhile, at the Weasley tent...

"Wait, I thought your Mum closed her stall today," Jim asked. "What do you mean she's off making a lot of food for," he suddenly made a face, "*Lucius Malfoy!*"

"The food stall is closed today," Ron replied. "But Mum still has a catering contract with Mr. Malfoy for some big shindig he's doing tonight at the BMW tent."

"The... BMW tent?"

"Yeah, that's what everybody's calling it. Apparently, it's some in-joke Harry came up with about a Muggle car manufacturer."

Jim winced at the mention of his ex-brother. "Still, if she's working today, I'd like to help. And honestly, I could use the money!"

Ron frowned. "Jim, I think you can survive without one day's worth of wages, especially since you're only getting paid one galleon a day. You've worked hard all week. Honestly, harder than most of my siblings. So let's take today off and go exploring the campgrounds. Mum has all the help she needs. Bill, Charlie, and Ginny are with her over at Black..."

The boy caught himself, but just a second too late. Jim's eyes narrowed.

"At Black... what?"

"Never mind, Jim. It's not important."

"Ron!" Jim snapped. "Please, don't try to hide stuff from me just because you think it will upset me, okay? I've had enough of that from my Mum and Dad over the last few years."

Ron took a deep breath. "Okay. *Promise me* that you won't get mad, okay?"

"Oh Merlin, is it *that* bad?!" Jim said almost plaintively.

"... Maybe? Anyway, Mum's doing all her specialty cooking in the kitchen at Blackstone."

Jim blinked in confusion. "Black... stone? What's that?"

Ron licked his lips nervously. "It's what Harry renamed Potter Manor to."

Jim stared at him.

"On account of the fact that he and Sirius Black are under that Oath of Enmity thing, you see? So living in a place called Potter Manor was making them all... squirrelly!"

"Harry Black *renamed my home* ?! The one that's been called Potter Manor for *over a thousand years* ?!"

"Well, it's just temporary, Jim. You can change it back when the lease runs out."

"IN EIGHTEEN YEARS!"

Ron shrugged helplessly, and then, Jim fell back onto his cot and put his hands over his face.

"Unbelievable. Un-*fucking* -believable!"

Ron gasped, as it was the first time that he'd ever heard his friend use that degree of vulgarity. Then, Jim pulled his hands aside from his face and looked up at Ron.

"Why did he name it Blackstone? Just because of his new name?"

The other boy made a face. "Well, yeah. I mean, um, that... and the fact that he had all the masonry on the outside changed to look black."

Jim said nothing. He couldn't even if he wanted to, as he was suddenly limited to a faint gargling sound not unlike that of a small frog lodged in his throat that was presently being throttled to death.

Lucius Malfoy's "big shindig," as Ron had dubbed it, was actually a formal banquet paid for by Lucius but thrown on behalf of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. In addition to the members of Malfoy's political alliance, the guests would include the players and coaching staff of all the semifinalist teams (Australia, Bulgaria, Ireland, and Luxembourg) and all the exhibition teams, various dignitaries from the semifinalist nations, a number of Ministry officials, and various miscellaneous guests who "knew the right people."

While 3M handled the catering, Lucius and Harry summoned their respective house elves to handle the actual serving. As for the Weasleys themselves, Harry had issued the entire family an invitation to the gathering, as well as free formal

robes for the whole family from Madam Malkin's. Arthur demurred, but Harry insisted.

"I still owe George a life debt, Mr. Weasley," Harry had said when he'd first offered the invitation. "Humor me. An invitation to a party is the *least* I could do. And *besides*, Mrs. Weasley has worked so hard to help this come together. I'd really like her there to be recognized."

Arthur grimaced before responding. "I'm very grateful, Harry. And I do want my Molly to get the credit she deserves. But there's just one problem. You see..."

He hesitated and coughed nervously.

"*Jim Potter* is staying with us in our tent through the finals. And given his status, I'm... uncomfortable just leaving him alone in the tent by himself. So I suppose either Bill or Charlie will have to stay with him. Or them, really-I'm sure Ron will want to stay with him. Though it's a shame Ron would have to miss this since he idolizes so many of the players who'll be there."

Harry's eye twitched, but he reinforced his Occlumency and persevered. "Say no more, Mr. Weasley. Despite our... *differences*, Jim is welcome to come as a guest of your family. Of course, I would expect that one of your older sons stay with him at all times to keep him out of trouble. And also away from both Sirius and me. And probably my cousin Tonks, now that I think about it. And it goes without saying that I am *not* buying brand new formal robes for *him*. "

"Oh, no fears, Harry!" Arthur said excitedly. "I'm sure we can find something for him to wear. And I promise, we'll keep him out of trouble and away from any members of House Black!"

Harry nodded but privately resigned himself to something going wrong. Where he and Jim Potter were concerned, it seemed an inevitability.

Later...

"I'm still not sure this is a good idea," said Jim cautiously. "I mean, there will be *a lot* of people at this party that really *hate* me."

"Maybe so," said Ron. "But there will also be a lot of people to look out for you. All the Weasleys will be there, plus a bunch of Aurors and Hit Wizards and Ministry officials. I mean, yeah, Lucius Malfoy is a Death Eater, and everyone in Sirius Black's family is cursed to hate you. But surely no one's gonna try anything in front of that many important people!"

Ron leaned in closer. "And besides, wouldn't you be willing to risk death if it meant meeting Viktor Krum?"

Jim laughed. "Probably so. But I don't have any dress robes here. Or at all, if I'm being honest."

"Really?" asked Arthur, who'd joined the boys in their room at the tent to extend the invitation. "I'd have figured you'd be decked out because you go to official functions all the time."

Jim looked away somewhat bashfully. "We, um, had to sell 'em all," he mumbled.

All three were silent for a few seconds.

"Well, look, Jim," said Arthur kindly. "We'll all be taking a Portkey to Diagon Alley around three o'clock. You can come

with us and we'll see if we can find you something appropriate that we can afford."

"Mr. Weasley!" Jim exclaimed. "I... I can't ask you to buy me robes! I'm supposed to be working for you!"

"Well, it's more like you're working for Molly, truth be told. But you're also our guest and Ronnie's best friend, so I'm happy to do it."

Jim smiled weakly. "I tell you what. I'll go with you to Madam Malkin's, and we'll see what *I* can afford first. Then, if we still need to, we can talk about you *loaning* me money for dress robes."

"Fair enough," Arthur said with a smile.

While the fittings for the Weasleys went without a hitch, finding something for Jim that was within his price range was another matter. In fact, literally the only set of dress robes for sale in his size was second-hand, *maroon velvet*, and had some rather moldy-looking lace frills at the collar and both cuffs. Ron's eyes bugged out at the sight of them, and he bit back a laugh at his friend's distress.

"Better you than me, mate," he said. "Personally, I'd go starkers before I wore those in public."

Madam Malkin clucked her tongue at Ron who blushed at having offended the seamstress.

"Well," she said, "they were quite fashionable back in the day, but if you don't like them, so be it. Of course, if you can't afford to buy anything, you could always *hire* robes for the evening."

"... Hire robes?" Jim asked in confusion.

The witch nodded. "Yes. If you only need the robes for a single event, I can let you have them for a reduced rate, usually an hourly rate. But once the event's over, at the stroke of midnight, they'll instantly be summoned back here to the shop. We call it our Cinderella Special."

The figure she quoted for hiring for the evening a set of robes of the same style as Ron's was something he could afford, though it would take half the galleons he'd earned over two weeks working for 3M, and at the end of the night, he'd have nothing to show for it. Well, nothing but the chance to meet Viktor Krum and a few dozen of the world's best Quidditch players.

"It's a deal," he said.

That evening...

As Jim entered the palatial tent along with the Weasleys, he couldn't help but be impressed. The circular interior was enormous, more than half the size of the Hogwarts Great Hall, and fully occupied by well over a hundred guests. The tent had been roughly divided into six zones: one with tables for each of the four semifinalist teams and their guests that had been decorated with that nation's colors, a fifth area on the far side set up for dignitaries from all the participating nations, and a large central area that served as "neutral ground" and would later become a formal dance floor.

And in the section reserved for the Bulgarians, Jim couldn't help but notice Harry Black standing next to Draco Malfoy... and headed straight for *Viktor Krum*. But before he could

say or do anything, Jim was distracted by a familiar voice from nearby.

"Well, well, well! Don't you look civilized for a change!"

It was Padma Patil moving towards Jim and the Weasleys from the direction of the Luxembourg section. Jim did a double take. He was used to seeing Padma in either her Hogwarts uniform, the martial arts outfit she wore for Wu Xi Do practice, or in casualwear. In particular, she'd never been one for makeup. Tonight, however, her hair was styled in long flowing curls, and she wore a knee-length Ravenclaw-blue dress of some kind (one that really brought out her eyes) with dark grey form-fitting trousers underneath and a shiny golden shawl over her shoulders. She looked radiant.

"Padma!" Jim exclaimed. And to his utter mortification, his voice broke in the process. He coughed and tried again.

"Ahem. Padma! You look... *amazing* !"

"Thank you," she responded. "It's called a salwar suit. Muggle fashion from back home. Perfect for parties, but much more practical than a sari, I think."

"I, ah, don't know what that is." Jim glanced at Ron, who shrugged.

"Well, let me show you both," she said with a smirk.

"Sanjeev bought Parvati a rather extravagant one for this event. Come sit with us for a while." Then, she turned to Ron. "I'm pleased you're here too, Ron. My father wanted to meet you."

"Me?" Ron asked in surprise. "Why?"

"I suspect he wanted to finally thank you for saving Parvati last summer. He never found the time back then, which

Parvati and I thought was rather rude of him to be honest."

"Oh, that's okay," Ron said bashfully. "It was nothing."

"It was hardly *nothing* to save my sister's life, Ron," Padma said. "Particularly since, as I recall, it put you into a coma for several hours."

"Wait, what?" said a confused Charlie Weasley, who was standing behind Ron and Jim, the other Weasleys having moved on to their reserved table. "Why am I just now hearing about a coma?"

Ron blushed furiously as he tried to stammer a response followed by an introduction for his older brother. Then, Padma moved to stand between Ron and Jim and took each of them by the arm.

"I tell you what, Charlie Weasley. Come join us, and Parvati can regale you with tales of your brother's heroism. By the way, apparently, we're all honorary Luxembourgers tonight. I hope that's not a problem."

And with that, she led the two boys off towards the Luxembourg section, with a slightly stunned Charlie following behind. And as Jim Potter suddenly found himself entranced by Padma's new look, Harry Black, for once, was forgotten.

As Harry followed behind, Draco Malfoy made his way to the table where the Bulgarian national team sat. A stern man who appeared to be a Bulgarian Auror moved to block them, but Viktor Krum called out in some harsh Eastern European tongue (Bulgarian, presumably) and the man stepped aside. Then, Krum himself moved over to them and, to Harry's surprise, nearly pulled Draco off the ground into a bear hug.

Harry's surprise only grew when Draco spoke to Krum in what sounded like a *completely different* Eastern European language (Russian, maybe?), though he could clearly make out words that he thought sounded like "Harry" and "Black." Krum's face lit up in response.

"Ah! Harry Black! Used to be Harry Potter but unpleasant family excrement of cow! I have seen memories of Harry Black fly! Very good! Not as good as Dragon here, but very good!"

"Um, thank you," Harry said as he tried to process the comparison of his family history to *excrement of cow*. He turned to Draco.

"Was that Bulgarian you were speaking, Draco, er, Dragon?"

"Russian," Draco said with a smug expression. "I also speak French, Italian, and I'm learning German next. Viktor here speaks Russian and French, but his English is a work in progress."

"Dragon!" Viktor exclaimed with a hurt expression. "Do not mock Viktor! Viktor is learning your Englander speech as fast as can!"

"Well, I regret that I don't speak any of those languages, Viktor," Harry said. "I've taken the potions for both Elder and Younger Futhark, but they don't really lend themselves to casual conversation."

"Futhark is good for other things. Harry Black rune casts?"

Harry blinked. "I... do runic enchantments. Or at least I'm beginning to. I was part of a group that put together the Eye-Spies, if you're familiar with them."

"Ah, yes!" Viktor said with sudden excitement. "Camera things! They float above stadium recording games! Harry Black did those?"

"With the help of others," Harry said slowly. Draco was quiet but was smirking for some reason.

"Viktor is to be getting NEWT in Ancient Runes after end of year! Maybe Viktor will design own brooms! Haha!" He clapped Harry on the back rather forcefully. "What else is Harry Black working on?"

Harry looked back and forth between an increasingly smug Draco and the effusive Bulgarian Seeker.

"Well, this is just a side project, but I've been working on modifying the Protego Orbis and incorporating it into a broom so as to make it submersible."

Viktor's eyes widened. "Broom that flies underwater? Like fish? Ingenuitous! But how does Harry Black solve problem of drag on thrust when moving through water in spherio... spherio... in *ball shape*?"

Harry tilted his head slightly and studied Viktor for a second. Then, *whir-click-kaleidoscope*.

"Well, I'm still working on that part." He paused to take a sip of punch. "Not to change the subject, Viktor, and I hope you won't take this the wrong way... but am I right in assuming you *understand* English just fine? You just can't *speak* it?"

Viktor's eyes widened in surprise. "What Harry Black mean?" he asked cautiously.

"Well, you're obviously having problems with pronouns and with subject-verb agreement. But on the other hand, you

can follow words like *submersible*. Oh, and *excrement*, I suppose."

Draco laughed suddenly and then held out his hand. Viktor shook his head in amazement before pulling a galleon from a pocket and handing it over to the boy.

"A Legilimens. At *fourteen* . Amazement!"

Harry turned to Draco in consternation. "Um, *Dragon*, have you been spreading *all* my secrets with your friends at Durmstrang?!"

"Don't be silly, Harry! All your *good* secrets are under oaths!"

Viktor laughed. "Fear not, Harry Black. Viktor will keep all secrets! But only if Harry Black will keep Viktor's! Please to not tell that Viktor understands Englander speech?"

Harry chuckled. "Agreed. But how can you understand so well but speak... like *that* ?"

Viktor sighed. "Let us just say unfortunate mishap with language potion, yes? But enough of that. Tell Viktor more about underwater broom!"

Meanwhile, in the dignitaries' section, Percy Weasley feared that he was about to witness a declaration of war from one group or another. For his boss, Bartemius Crouch, was about to make some formal introductions.

"*McAvity* !" Crouch snapped. Beside him, Percy coughed rather forcefully. Crouch turned to glare at him before composing himself. "I mean... Director McAvity. I have some introductions to make."

"Splendid," said the Dark Lord McAvity as he wiped his face with a napkin before standing to face the group with a genial expression. "I love meeting new people."

"Ladies and Gentlewizards," Crouch continued while ignoring the Muggleborn's remark. "I present to you Alexander McAvity, Australia's Director for Magical-Muggle Affairs and Junior Mugwump to the ICW. Director McAvity, allow me to introduce... Grigor Dermotov, Minister of Magic for Bulgaria and Emissary from the Balkan Alliance."

Dermotov was a portly man with an extravagant moustache and somewhat old-fashioned and conservative robes. He nodded stiffly towards McAvity but said nothing, possibly because he spoke no English and didn't even know what was going on.

"Or perhaps he does," thought Percy, "and is just silently registering his disapproval of an influential Muggleborn since they don't have any where he comes from. "

"Next," growled Crouch, "we have the Kumar Pasha, who is here on behalf of Wizarding Luxembourg."

The Pasha was a powerfully built man in his 50s with bushy eyebrows and a goatee that came down into a sharp point. He wore flowing colorful robes of the sort associated with the Magical Middle East and a large turban with an enormous ruby set into it.

"A pleasure to meet you both," McAvity said diplomatically, though neither man responded verbally. Percy recalled that, whatever the Bulgarian's feelings about Muggleborns, the Kumar Pasha's family had supported blood purism for generations, and the current Pasha's father had been accused of financially supporting Grindelwald, though nothing was ever proven.

Percy took a moment to compare McAvity's attire to the others. It was a mix of Muggle and Magical clothing, basically a crisp black suit with a bow tie ("A *tuxedo*?" Percy seemed to recall from his father's descriptions of Muggle-wear) underneath a black opera cloak. For the most part, the ensemble looked smart if untraditional in a Wizarding setting, save for the one splash of color: a green and yellow button on his jacket lapel that bore the letters "McA." As far as Percy could see, everyone in the Australian section wore matching buttons.

"Next," Crouch continued, "we have Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, who represents Wizarding Britain and, by extension, Wizarding Ireland. Madam Umbridge is standing in for Minister Fudge who could not be here this evening. She is accompanied by Senior Auror Pius Thicknesse."

Percy resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Fudge "*couldn't be here*" because he refused to risk having his picture taken shaking hands with McAvity. On the bright side, Umbridge seemed to have blossomed as Fudge's public face in all the public events he didn't want to face himself. While she'd had a reputation for dowdiness, for tonight, she'd gotten her hair styled and her makeup professionally done, and she wore new evening robes in basic black but with a vibrant pink satin lining. Dolores Umbridge would probably never be described as beautiful, but the effect tonight was quite charming.

"Enchanté, Madam Umbridge," McAvity said gallantly as he took the witch's hand and kissed her knuckles. Dolores blushed until her cheeks were the same color as the lining of her robes. Thankfully, for once, she didn't titter. Beside her, Thicknesse scowled with obvious jealousy.

"And finally," Crouch said after steeling himself, "our host for this evening. Lucius Malfoy, Lord of the Ancient and Noble House of Malfoy."

Malfoy stepped forward and bowed quite respectfully to McAvity.

"A pleasure to meet you, Lord Malfoy," the man said. "Can I assume you are the son of Abraxas Malfoy?"

"You are correct sir," said Malfoy languidly. "I am indeed the son and successor to Abraxas Malfoy, the wizard who worked so hard to impose the title of Dark Lord upon you when I was but a child and who ultimately saw you banished from these lands. I became Lord when he... passed away in 1979."

"I see," said McAvity while giving Lucius an appraising look. "If I may be so bold, Lord Malfoy, how did your father pass away?"

There was a frisson of tension over the entire group at McAvity's bluntness in asking how his old enemy had died, but McAvity's attention was focused on Lucius. And he was surprised to see, not a reaction of anger, but rather a ghost of a smile that passed too quickly for anyone else to notice.

"Irony, Director McAvity," Lucius said without a hint of anger or disdain. "My father died of an acute case... of irony."

"I cannot *believe* they're just... *insulting us* like this!" Daphne Greengrass hissed angrily. Her dearest friend, Tracey Davis, turned to her but noticed that the Greengrass Heiress wasn't even looking back. Instead, she was glaring with absolute fury at the nearby Australian delegation. Tracey frowned.

"Honestly, Daph," said the longsuffering ward of House Greengrass. "What are the Australians doing *now* that's so offensive?"

Daphne scoffed. "Don't you see?" she snapped. "They're all wearing buttons that say *McA* . They're literally just *flaunting* their support for their Muggleborn Dark Lord."

Tracey rolled her eyes quietly. But the snort of contempt from behind them was quite audible. Both Slytherins turned at once to find Hermione Granger just a few feet behind them bearing a disdainful expression.

"... Granger," Daphne said with some surprise.

"Greengrass," Hermione responded coolly. Despite herself, Daphne grew angry at the look Hermione was giving her.

"You disagree? I'm not surprised. Look, I know you're a Muggleborn, Granger. But that's no reason to support a *Dark Lord*, let alone wear a button declaring one's allegiance to him. It's like some sort of *Muggleborn Dark Mark* ."

Hermione chuckled. "Nonsense, of course."

"Well, if you're so clever, what other message are we supposed to take from *McA* buttons on all their robes if not support for McAvity?"

Hermione gave a condescending look. "*Magical Commonwealth. Of Australia* . MCA has been the official abbreviation for their country for nearly as long as it's existed. I suppose they went with a lower-case C to wind up the British Purebloods-which is clearly working-but there's nothing new about the abbreviation."

She took a step forward. "And while we're correcting misunderstandings, I'm told you spent a lot of time in your Cultural Preservation Society meetings spreading tales that Alexander McAvity wanted to impose some sort of ridiculous marriage law. Also untrue."

"It most certainly is true!" Daphne hissed. "He wanted to force Purebloods to marry Muggleborns and even Muggles in order to destroy our way of life."

Hermione shook her head. "I looked it up after I heard that bit of nonsense. The only interest McAvity and his movement had in marriage was that they wanted to ban *forced* marriages and end the practice of wizarding families *selling their children* in marriage contracts before they're out of diapers. Marriages between two people who might have nothing in common by the time they come of age and who might well be so different that they would have to drink *Amortentia* at the wedding just to be willing to put up with one another."

Daphne's face flushed. "There is *nothing* wrong with Amortentia between two consenting spouses, Granger. My mother and father still take it every year to commemorate their anniversary." Then, her eyes flashed angrily. "And from the rumors I've been hearing, Granger, perhaps *your* parents' marriage would be in better shape if Amortentia was an option for them."

"*Daphne!*" Tracey exclaimed in shock. But Hermione did not rise to the provocation. If anything, she became colder.

"It's quite alright, Davis," she said. "Greengrass's comments about my mother and father don't bother me."

She took a step towards Daphne and fixed her with a steely gaze that almost made Daphne want to pull back.

"After all," Hermione continued. "It's not like I haven't heard *worse* ."

And with that, she turned and strode away.

"Um, Daph? What the hell did you do to make Hermione Granger look at you like she wanted to carve your heart out with a butter knife?"

Daphne exhaled shakily as she watched Hermione's retreating back. "Honestly, Tracey? I have *absolutely no idea*. "

By nine o'clock, the speeches were over and the desserts had been presented and consumed. At Lucius Malfoy's insistence, Molly rose to be recognized as the one who'd provided the well-received food, and she nearly cried at the applause she received from the crowd. Then, the tables and chairs in the center of the tent were vanished to make way for a dance floor while, nearby, enchanted musical instruments rose into the air to begin a Viennese waltz.

Among the first on the floor were the "American" Archie Goodwin and a young Australian girl who'd accepted his invitation to dance.

"I'm sorry I haven't had the chance to speak with you yet," said Regulus to his cousin, "*Delphini*," as he surreptitiously put up a Muffliato Charm around them to obscure their conversation. "To be honest, we were surprised when you came back to Britain so soon."

The young woman (who was more accurately described as "a middle-aged woman who'd had some work done") shrugged.

"Buck was activated for McAvity's security detail, and he was uncomfortable leaving me unattended in his home back in Wagga Wagga. He was worried I might have some sort of relapse, though whether a physical one or a *mental* one, I've no idea."

Regulus frowned. "And how are you, Bellatrix? Really?"

The former Bellatrix Black Lestrangle smiled wanly. "I honestly don't know, Regulus. Physically, I'm mostly recovered. The nature of my... condition allowed me to bounce back from Dementor exposure more readily than Sirius. But still, every time I walk by a mirror, I can't help but gasp at my reflection. The magic used on this body makes it look like an 18-year-old girl, but I don't look at all like Bellatrix Black did at that age. I've black hair and, I suppose, a certain natural haughtiness. But that's it. And I still have trouble *acting* my apparent age. Back in Wagga Wagga, I've already had to fend off courting attempts from several boys who are physically the same age as *young Delphini White* but who really seem like callow immature youths to me. It's... vexing. I'd actually wanted a body that would have put me in my late 20s or early 30s, but age-reducing magic is very difficult. And in my case, I *had* to be reset physically to a point before I read that damnable book and became Miss Demeanor."

Regulus sighed and chose to change the subject. "That still doesn't answer the question: *why Delphini White*?"

"Is there a problem with our little fiction that she's a cousin of the late Lazarus White? With luck, I may yet achieve my girlhood dream of becoming an Auror, albeit in Australia rather than Britain, and the White name might open some sympathetic doors."

"True, but... we've been exploring ways to bring Regulus Black back to life. To do so, we'll have to work around the connections between Regulus Black and Lazarus White *and* Gilderoy Lockhart. But we'll cross that bridge when we come to it, I suppose. I was really wondering more about Delphini."

"It's from the constellation Delphinus," the witch answered.

"Well, yes, I know that part. I'm a Black too, remember. But why a constellation named after a dolphin?"

She lifted her chin defiantly. "I *like* dolphins. When I was a little girl, I said that one day, I'd have a child and name it Delphinus if it was a boy and Delphini if it was a girl. After... well, after everything that happened, I never had that opportunity to become a mother, and I doubt I ever will."

"Bella..."

"Reg," she interrupted. "My appearance doesn't change the facts of my biology. This 18-year-old body hides a woman in her mid-40s. The likelihood of my ever being able to conceive a child is low and gets lower every day. So why shouldn't I claim that fanciful name from my childhood for myself instead? Claim it and use it for my second chance at a life."

Before Regulus could respond, the waltz ended and switched over to a pavane as the two cousins stepped apart. Then, there was a polite cough from nearby. It was a handsome young man with hair the color of sunset and a dragon tooth earring set in his ear.

"I hope I'm not intruding, but I wonder if I might have the honor of the next dance?"

"And you are?" the witch said, intrigued.

"William Weasley," he replied. "Though my friends call me Bill."

She glanced back to Regulus who simply shrugged. "Here's to second chances," he said.

Then, Bellatrix Black took Bill Weasley's hand. "Delphini White. A pleasure to meet you, Bill Weasley."

Regulus watched as the pair twirled away, only to be surprised when someone spoke behind him.

"Ah, young love. So much fun to watch and see where it all leads."

Reg turned to see an attractive woman in fashionable (if vividly colored) robes and platinum blonde hair. Her infamous bejeweled spectacles instantly identified her even to casual readers of the *Daily Prophet*.

"You seem to be all alone on the dance floor, Mr. Archie Goodwin," said Rita Skeeter flirtatiously as she held out a hand. "Can I tempt you into a dance or two?"

For a brief second, Regulus wondered what the hell he was about to get into. Then, he decided.

"Temptation, Miss Skeeter, implies that the proper response would be to say *no*," the wizard said before taking the witch's hand.

At eleven o'clock, the party began to wind down, especially after the Irish, Bulgarian, and Australian teams all announced that they were heading back to their own sectors for "after-parties." Jim and Ron had never gotten near Viktor Krum, as Harry and Draco seemed to monopolize the

Bulgarian Seeker the whole night long. Intellectually, Jim knew that the feelings of intense jealousy and annoyance he felt due to Harry unwittingly barring him from meeting one of his idols was due to the Imperius Curse.

Unfortunately, knowing the feelings were unnatural didn't stop Jim from having them.

Despite, he'd thoroughly enjoyed his time with Padma, though Ron seemed miffed that they'd spent most of the time with Luxembourgers. Jim attributed it to Ron's general disdain for the Luxembourg national team and his specific disdain for Sanjeev Kumar, the Pasha's son who *barely* managed to conceal blood purist tendencies. It didn't help that, for reasons unknown to both the Patil sisters, their father spent the better part of an hour pumping Ron for personal information: his likes and dislikes, how he was doing at Hogwarts, how his family's various business ventures were doing, what his career goals were, and (oddly) whether he was dating anyone.

On the bright side, Ron did get signatures from the whole Luxembourg team for his autograph book, and Sanjeev took pride in introducing the pair to various Quidditch luminaries associated with the Irish and Bulgarian teams (other than Krum), most of whom were cool but polite. Quidditch purists might not *like* the Kumar Dynasty-as the Pasha insisted on calling it-and its effect on European Quidditch, but they also couldn't help but respect its influence, at least enough to let it open a few doors here and there.

Somewhat amusingly, Ron also picked up an autograph from Oliver Wood, their erstwhile house-mate who was present as a guest of House Warrington. While the boys had learned that Oliver had been picked up as a reserve Keeper for the Montrose Magpies, they had not realized that the Magpies

were owned by an aggressively Pureblooded family whose Lord had never taken the Dark Mark but whose affiliations had always been obvious. Nevertheless, Oliver seemed quite happy in his new role and would not hear a single word against the Warringtons. Young Cassius overheard the conversation and came by to clap Wood on the shoulder and praise his performance so far. He favored Jim with a smug, self-satisfied look the whole time.

As the party ended, Sanjeev announced that he and his fiancé Parvati would be posing for pictures with the Luxembourg team to appear in the Bigonville Boggart, Luxembourg's only wizarding newspaper (which the Kumars, naturally, owned). Unwilling to stay and sit on the sidelines for Merlin knew how long, Padma told her parents that she would make her way back to their tent alone. When they balked, Jim gallantly offered to escort her. Mr. Patil looked at him strangely... and then looked at Ron even more strangely, before giving his assent.

Once outside the tent, Jim turned to Ron and Charlie.

"Look, guys. There's no reason for you to have to chaperone us. The Pasha's setup isn't far from here and it's a quick walk from there back to the Weasley tent. I'm perfectly capable of escorting Padma without needing any bodyguards."

Charlie noticed the pleading expression on Jim's face and immediately recognized that he wanted some time alone with the young girl.

"Weeeelll," he said with a smile. "How about we compromise? I can see the Pasha's tent from here, and you're right. It's not far. So Ron and I will wait here for you to drop your friend off and then come back before we go to our tent together. Sound fair?"

"Uhh," Ron interrupted. "Jim, I *really* don't know if it's a good idea for you to be alone here. I mean, who knows who might be out there waiting to jump you!"

"Ron, I'll be *fine* ! You know I can take care of myself!"

Ron bit down on the obvious response. He'd spent three years observing all the times Jim could *not* take care of himself, but that wasn't something he felt like pointing out right now. So instead, he glanced at his wristwatch.

"Also, can I remind you it's 11:15? And that you *have* to be back in our tent by midnight or, well, you *know* what'll happen?"

Jim scoffed. "Ron, don't worry. Five minutes there and back. And then ten minutes to get to our tent. That's 11:35 at the latest. Plenty of time."

And without another word, Jim took Padma by the arm and led her off towards the nearby Luxembourg sector.

Charlie sighed loudly with a grin on his face. "Ah! Young love in bloom!"

Ron said nothing and was not smiling.

Nearby, several others observed both the conversation and Jim Potter's departure before stepping away to send a quick message through a magic mirror.

The five-minute walk to the Pasha's tent was uneventful, and Jim enjoyed his conversation with the young Ravenclaw. They talked about Wu Xi Do, about Remus Lupin (Jim was reticent about the Animagery book he'd received from Lupin; Padma had heard nothing at all and was disappointed

by his absence from Shamballa), about what their respective summers were like, and about what they were hoping for in the coming school year.

Finally, they reached their destination. Jim hesitated as, for some reason, he wasn't sure precisely how to say goodbye. "*Well, see ya later !*" seemed wholly inadequate for the occasion. Also, he was suddenly terrified that his voice would crack again. Padma smiled at his obvious discomfort.

"I should tell you upfront, Jim Potter, that my mother made me promise never to kiss a boy on the first date."

Jim blushed but then smiled. "So... after our second date?"

"Ah-ah-ah," she answered while wagging her finger no. "Technically, this wasn't even our first date. This was me inviting you and Ron to sit with us at a party. You would have to ask me out one-on-one for it to count as a date, Jim."

He nodded slowly. "Well, in that case, I know it's probably a bit early, but... Padma Patil, would you do me the honor of accompanying me to Hogsmeade for the first Hogsmeade Weekend? On our *first* date?"

Padma grinned. "It would be an honor, Potter. Until next time." Then, she waved her fingers at him before entering the tent, still smiling.

Now alone, Jim suddenly realized that he was grinning like a loon, and he turned and headed back to meet Ron and Charlie.

But halfway there, he paused suddenly, for up ahead, he noticed two suspicious figures dressed in dark robes at the edge of an alleyway between two tents. They did not seem to notice him at first, and out of instinct, he took cover

behind some boxes. Then, one turned to look in his direction. Jim gasped. The figure was wearing a bone-white mask of the kind he'd seen in so many photographs from the last war.

It was the mask of a Death Eater.

Swiftly, Jim ducked back down. The two Death Eaters hesitated for a second and then took off down the alleyway. Jim was torn. He knew it was reckless to follow alone, but at the same time, he thought he might get close enough to hear them talking or learn where they were going. Even if he only saw which tent they entered, he could send word to James, who would know what to do.

Jim pulled his wand out and crept down the alleyway that marked the boundary between the Luxembourger section and the Australian section. He could still see the two further down walking swiftly away as if on a mission. Neither seemed to notice him following. They turned left at an intersection. Jim pursued. Once at the intersection himself, he saw one of the two take another left, the other presumably further ahead. The Boy-Who-Lived increased his pace while trying to remain stealthy. But just before he reached the next intersection, he heard a low voice snarl from behind him.

"STUPEFY."

Caught by surprise, he turned and tried to dodge but it was too late. The Stunner slammed into him, and the Boy-Who-Lived slumped to the ground. From behind him, the other figure in Death Eater robes shimmered into view, still breathing heavily. He glanced down admiringly at the ring on his finger, the one he'd been given by his father that conferred invisibility for as long as the wearer could hold his

breath. Thankfully, Jim Potter had been so eager in his foolish pursuit that he had darted right past without any idea that an invisible enemy was lying in wait. As he advanced towards Jim, his partner in crime returned, and as one, they pulled back their hoods and removed their masks, so they could better see their captured quarry.

"Disappointingly easy," said Albert Yaxley. "His brother put up a far better challenge."

Giles Yaxley snorted. "By *put up a far better challenge*, you mean he beat your arse, right, little brother?"

Albert sneered angrily. "He'll get his as well, Giles. Just you wait."

Then, the Durmstrang Fifth Year glared down at the boy unconscious at their feet. "So, it seems we have the Boy-Who-Lived at our mercy. Any chance we're allowed to have a little fun with him?"

"Absolutely not," Giles said firmly. "Father was explicit. Jim Potter is not to be harmed in any way."

Then, he reached down to pick up Jim's wand from where it had fallen.

"We have all we need right here," Giles said with a cruel smile.

Norvegicus

Target 2 has been acquired. Awaiting instructions on how to deliver it.

Misericorde

Sometime later, Jim woke up with a pounding headache. He was alone and still lying prone on the ground where he'd been knocked unconscious. After shaking his head to clear the cobwebs, he realized that he was unharmed, a fact which actually surprised him in light of how his encounters with Death Eaters usually went. Then, he stiffened in sudden worry. His wand was not in his hand nor in his holster nor anywhere on the ground around him. After several minutes of anxious searching, he was forced to assume the worst: that his attackers, who were likely Death Eaters, had stolen his wand.

Jim rubbed his hands across his face as he wondered how his life could get any worse. His mental query was answered by a strange tingling sensation that briefly covered his entire body followed by a sudden chill. Jim looked down and saw that he was now naked save for a pair of plaid Muggle boxer shorts and a t-shirt that identified him as "*The Supreme Git of the Universe*," a sentiment that had never felt more accurate.

"*Okay, what to do, what to do?*" he thought. Every option seemed destined to lead to public humiliation. He could run back to Padma's tent in his underwear so that his (maybe future) girlfriend could see him in this state. Or he could streak his way back to where Ron and Charlie were hopefully still waiting for him, which meant *even more* people seeing him like this (*including Harry and probably the Malfoys*!).

"Oh yeah, and with my luck, Viktor Krum and Rita Skeeter!" he said aloud. Despite himself, he reached up and wiped the beginnings of a tear from his eye with his thumb. He was *so tired* of feeling like a screw up. Of always making dumb mistakes and then paying for them with one humiliation after another.

"No more," he muttered. Then, he paused at what he'd just said and closed his eyes in determination. "No more. No more." Finally, he found what he'd been looking for: the tiny hidden switch deep within his own psyche.

"Nevermore," he said before taking wing up into the night sky.

It was less than two minutes to the Weasley tent as the crow (or rather, the raven) flies, and the black corvid darted in through the tent flap, past the common area, and into the room Jim shared with Ron. It perched itself on the headboard of Jim's bed and cawed twice. Then, the raven tensed and took wing again. It only flew a few feet before its entire form grew and morphed into the shape of a young man.

Jim looked around wildly as if to make sure all his body parts were present and appropriately human. They were. And perhaps more importantly, both his t-shirt and boxers were still in place as well. He had done it. He had *chosen* to change into a raven. He had retained his human intelligence throughout his raven-flight. He had *chosen* to turn back into a boy. And he had even retained the clothes he'd worn before he started.

For a moment, all concerns about the attack and the theft of his wand were gone.

"YES!" Jim bellowed while thrusting his arms up into the air. "I DID IT! I'M AN ANIMAGUS! AND I'M NOT NAKED!"

"Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that last bit," said Ginny Weasley as she pulled aside the tent flap. "I'm sure I'd have gotten the vapors if you were screaming *and* naked. And me without a camera!"

In response to Ginny's appearance, a suddenly embarrassed Jim snatched the blanket off Ron's bed and wrapped it around himself.

"G-g-ginny!? What are you doing here?!"

"Oh, you know. Being just a *little girl*, Mum sent me home from the party early and then left me here alone in a tent with nothing to do so she could prepare the food stall for tomorrow."

The Slytherin Weasley folded her arms and smirked at the blushing boy.

"So, Jim, tell me more about this whole *Animagus* business."

A hotel suite in West London

1:00 a.m.

The three wizards and one witch had resided in the suite for just shy of a month, and by now, they were at once bored, frustrated, and deep in the grip of cabin fever. Even worse, they were French wizards (and one witch) hiding in Muggle Britain, which meant, among other things, that finding a decent cup of coffee was impossible.

But worse still, after all these weeks, the entire purpose of their mission ("*Opération: Serpentard*") had been a waste of time. In just shy of four weeks, the Listening Charm that had been so painstakingly hidden within the official badge of DMLE Director (and suspected Death Eater) Corban Yaxley had yielded almost no useful intel. Oh, the man was quite corrupt. That much was clear from the number of times he'd quietly interfered in DMLE investigations into fellow "*Mangemorts*," as well as other criminals who'd paid the

right bribes. But the agents had yet to hear any conversations that conclusively referred to actual Death Eater activities, let alone conversations that gave any insight on the current status of "*Tu-Sais-Qui*," the Dark Lord himself.

And worst of all, the night before, the damned Listening Charm had stopped working altogether right as Yaxley entered some secret meeting at the behest of Cassilda Selwyn, another Person of Interest. Thus far, the agents had been unable to determine whether the Charm had been blocked by some kind of security ward, whether the badge to which it had been attached had been damaged or lost, or whether the spell simply failed due to a mistake by the caster.

"You know my views," said Gaultier, the youngest member of the group. "I think the spell just failed. It was foolish to entrust its implementation to a child." He snorted contemptuously. "Let alone a *half-Veela* child!"

"Gaultier!" snapped Giraud, the only female in the group. "I've told you not to use that word!"

Gaultier snorted. "You've no cause to be offended, Jeanne. *Half-Veela* is hardly a slur when it is *literally* ..."

"Enough! Both of you!" snarled Besson. "And I remind you, Gaultier, that L'Inconnu have ears everywhere. Even if the girl is half-Veela, she is *their* half-Veela. Mock her at your peril."

Gaultier made a face, but before he could respond, Mézières spoke up. The fourth member of the team was presently manning the enchanted phonograph, which would magically inscribe any conversations overheard by the Listening

Charm onto a wax cylinder. Which, in fact, just started up again for the first time in over a day.

"Besson! The badge! It's started recording again!"

Besson moved closer to the recording station. "What is he saying?"

Mézières shrugged. "Nothing so far. But we're getting a clear signal. It... it sounds like... music?"

"On speaker," Besson ordered. The other agent flipped a switch, and instantly, sound emerged from the large Victrola speaker attached to the wax cylinder. Suddenly, they could all clearly hear a familiar tune played on what sounded like a glockenspiel. After a second, Besson recognized it.

"Brahms' Lullaby?" he exclaimed in surprise.

Gaultier yawned. "Sounds appropriate. We've been up all day and *yawn* -half the night. I could do... with... a..."

And with that, Gaultier simply dropped to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut, while nearby, Giraud stumbled and leaned against the wall to support herself.

"The music!" Besson cried out. "It's a curse! Quickly! Cut the feed!"

But it was too late. Mézières was already slumped in his chair and snoring loudly, while behind him, Besson heard as Giraud also collapsed to the floor. Then, there was a crash as the door to the hotel room burst open. Without hesitation, Besson let fly with his most powerful Stunner. The intruder in the doorway batted it aside without effort.

"***IMPERIO HORRIBILIS!***" said Augustus Rookwood. Besson struggled against the wave of crushing psychic force for nearly six full seconds. Then, his whole body went slack and his wand dropped to the floor.

"Master," he said simply.

Behind Besson, Brahms' Lullaby continued to play over the speaker until Rookwood reached into his pocket to produce Corban Yaxley's DMLE badge. He tapped it twice, and the gentle melody ceased.

"Music hath charms," the Death Eater said with a smirk before focusing his attention on Besson.

"Now, *mon frère*, let us get better acquainted."

Next: The QWC draws to its exciting conclusion!

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2: Nothing new at the moment.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: Brontokz, Deaaethiae, Eclipse, EssayOfThoughts | Aich, Hellion, Jerk Chicken, jobber, justanother random human, kean, Kylemagne, LFGB, midnight, Nemo's Flower Song, PrettyPinkCupcake, ProfessionalDragonslayer, Pyunik,

Rinrael, Rubric of Ahriman, Sakkiko, Sigurd, SlenderGnome, and Webstriker|Datti. Thanks, guys!

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 16,565. Followers: 17,479. Favorites: 15,703. Communities: 240. Discord followers: 4306! Go Team POS!

The Quidditch World Cup, part 4

Chapter 11: The Quidditch World Cup, part 4

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

***For information on how you can support my original fiction, please check out my website:
www.thesinisterman.com***

We now return you to your regularly scheduled fanfic

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Harry Black

and the Resurrection Game

Chapter 11: The Quidditch World Cup (Pt 4)

22 August 1994, Day 13

The Weasley Tent

10:00 a.m.

After Jim's return-in raven form, no less-to the Weasley tent the night before, he'd had a brief but fraught conversation with Ginny Weasley before a panicked Charlie and Ron burst into the tent looking for him. He explained that he'd escorted Padma Patil back to her tent without incident

before seeing two Death Eaters at the boundary between the Australian and Luxembourg sectors. He'd impulsively followed them only to be stunned and then robbed of his wand. To his surprise, Ron scowled at him in obvious anger before storming off to their room for bed. They hardly spoke for the rest of the night.

After the attack and robbery, the story Jim gave the Weasleys and later the DMLE investigators became a bit hazy. He told them that he was disoriented by the Stunning Hex and got lost but soon found the Weasley tent. Ginny confirmed that he'd entered the tent around midnight looking confused, but he soon recovered before her brothers arrived. Privately, Jim marveled at how effortlessly his best friend's little sister could lie not only to her own family but to seasoned law enforcement wizards. But in this instance, he was grateful for her Slytherin wiles.

After the Hit Wizards took their statements for the official report and departed, Jim, Bill and Arthur returned to the scene of the attack to confirm that Jim's wand was truly gone. Morose, Jim returned with the Weasleys for the night while Arthur sent word to the boy's parents.

The next morning, Lily and James Potter showed up at the Weasley tent full of both concern for their son's safety and anger at how his impetuosity had cost him his wand and could have cost him his life. Arthur Weasley was full of apologies, but Jim interrupted him.

"Please don't blame the Weasleys for this," he said to both his parents. "It was all my fault. If I'd just done what I was supposed to and gone straight back to meet Charlie and Ron, I'd have been fine. I was an idiot to go after those two Death Eaters myself."

Before anyone else could respond, a new voice was heard from the entrance to the tent, one that made James stiffen in apprehension.

"That's a bold claim, Mr. Potter," said Corban Yaxley, the DMLE Director and James's boss. Standing behind him were Auror Victoria Savage and two Hit Wizards. "And I would appreciate it very much if you would refrain from spreading such rumors around until an investigation has been conducted."

"I know what I saw," Jim said angrily. "They were Death Eaters."

"I've read the Hit Wizards' report, Mr. Potter." Yaxley paused and smiled at the boy. "May I call you Jim? It might get confusing what with there being *two* Mr. Potters in the room, don't you agree?"

Jim nodded but said nothing.

"Now then, Jim, before we hear anything more about Death Eaters, let's take a look at your memories of the attack."

At that point, Yaxley gestured to one of the Hit Wizards who was carrying a Ministry Pensieve, which he placed on a table in the center of the tent.

"Since you are currently *wandless*, Jim, I'm sure your father won't mind transferring the memory. All you need to do is think back and try to remember everything that happened last night pertaining to the incident."

Jim froze. "*Everything that happened*" included him revealing himself as an unregistered Animagus! The boy took a deep breath and tried his best to focus on just the memory of pursuing the Death Eaters without thinking

about anything that happened after he was stunned. James transferred the memory to the Pensieve while Lily moved behind Jim and put her hands gently on his shoulders as Yaxley, Savage, and James entered the memory. After barely a minute, they emerged.

"As I suspected, Jim, those were *not* Death Eaters," Yaxley said.

"Yes, they were!" Jim nearly shouted. Yaxley just looked down at him condescendingly.

"I can understand your confusion, Jim, as the last Death Eater sighting was when you were just a babe. But I assure you, those were not genuine Death Eater uniforms."

"Well, I reckon you'd know," Jim said in a low voice before wincing as his mother's hands suddenly dug into his shoulders. Yaxley ignored the implied accusation. Instead, he turned to Jim's father.

"Do you concur, James?" he asked somewhat smugly. "As I recall, you spent plenty of time during the war fighting Death Eaters up close."

James grimaced. He'd never confirmed it, but he was 90% certain he'd dueled Yaxley himself at least once while the latter had been wearing a Death Eater's mask. As James recalled, the man he'd fought that day certainly didn't *act* like he'd been under the Imperius. He turned to his son.

"He's right, Jim. Your attackers weren't wearing genuine Death Eater uniforms. They were just crude imitations."

"But Dad... !"

"If you don't believe your own father, Jim, you are welcome to review the memory yourself in the Pensieve. It's understandable that you didn't notice at the time, but I think the big giveaway is that one of your attackers was wearing *Muggle trainers* beneath his wizarding robes."

Yaxley looked around imperiously. "I think it's obvious what truly happened. The incident occurred at the boundary between the Luxembourgers... *and the Australians* . Given the conduct of the Australian contingent so far, I'll wager it was nothing more than some hooligans dressed up in homemade costumes who were out to perform some mischief that could be blamed on Death Eaters as a way of embarrassing the Ministry. And then the Boy-Who-Lived bumbles along and proves an irresistible target. I'll inform Minister Fudge and Director Crouch. And I suppose *McAvity* ."

He'd said the last name with transparent disdain. "Perhaps he can be prevailed upon to waive his diplomatic immunity long enough to let us search the Australian sector in force to find young Jim's lost wand."

His tone indicated that he thought such a request was unlikely to be granted. Then, Yaxley turned to James.

"And now that *that's* all settled-well, for my part, anyway- perhaps we should get back to work, eh, James? I received a report before I came over here that's already been forwarded to your department. Another regurgitating toilet, this time in Basingstoke."

James returned Yaxley's smug gaze impassively. "Yes, sir. I'll get right on it."

Yaxley bowed slightly to the group before departing along with Savage and the Hit Wizards.

Dejected, Jim sat down in a chair. "So what happens now?"

"Now?" Lily snapped. "Well my first inclination is to take you straight home and lock you in your room until the Hogwarts Express is ready to leave. Honestly, Jim! You were *lucky* to be attacked by *fake* Death Eaters. I cannot *believe* that you thought those people were actual Death Eaters and then decided it was a good idea to *go after them!* "

Jim opened his mouth but then sighed and closed it. His mother was right. His decision to act like he was in a *Boy-Who-Lived Adventure* instead of real life had cost him his wand, and he could have lost more.

Lily looked over to James and noticed his silently pleading expression. She exhaled.

"That said, there have been no other incidents during your time with the Weasleys, and I understand how devastating it would be for you to miss the last week of the Cup. So first of all, we're leaving this morning to visit the Potter Vault and see if any of the family wands will work for you. If we can find you a compatible wand, you can come back here, continue working for Mrs. Weasley, and watch the matches for the rest of the week."

Jim's face lit up in excitement, but Lily continued more firmly.

"*However*, you will not be spending the night here." She turned to the Weasley patriarch. "Arthur, when Jim is done with his work for the day, can you ensure that one of your older boys or someone else responsible keeps an eye on him when he's attending any matches? I'll be listening on our Wireless, and at the end of the night, I'll come pick him up and Side-Apparate him home."

"Mum!" Jim exclaimed, but a glare from Lily silenced him. Arthur looked at her, still embarrassed by the whole affair.

"If that's how you want to handle things, Lily, I fully understand. Once again, I do apologize for the... lapse in security, I suppose."

Nearby, Charlie blushed in embarrassment at his mistake. Next to him, Ron simply glared at Jim. Finally, James coughed into his fist.

"Well, that's all for now, I reckon. I'd better be off." He gave Arthur a weak smile. "Those toilets won't un-jinx themselves, after all."

Everyone laughed half-heartedly.

Jim returned to the 3M booth around noon with a new wand. Or, more accurately, a very old wand. Acacia and dragon heartstring, 8 and ½ inches, first purchased by Josiah Potter in 1835. It mostly worked for Jim, although he had the oddest feeling that it was... *disdainful* of him? Still, he could defend himself reasonably well if need be, and once he took the Twins' potion again, he was blessedly anonymous behind the face of "Barney Weasley."

Now his only concerns were (a) finding time to spend with Padma again and (b) figuring out why Ron was angry with him.

"*Oh, yeah,*" he thought ruefully. "*And paying off Ginny Weasley for her silence !*"

23 August 1994, Day 14

8:00 a.m

Sadly for Jim, his first concern went unresolved. He saw Padma only briefly after Luxembourg's 360-330 loss to Bulgaria, for whom Viktor Krum pulled out another miraculous last second win. Petulant after his team's loss, the Pasha had decided to return to Luxembourg with his entourage, which meant the Patils would be leaving early the next morning.

And in fact, they were already gone when Lily delivered Jim to the Weasley tent. Somewhat downbeat, the Boy-Who-Lived entered the tent and took his "Barny" potion for the day. Then, he looked around to make sure no one was watching as he entered Ginny's room. The girl was waiting for him with a friendly smile.

"Oh, cheer up, Jim!" she said. "Honestly, I envy you getting to sleep in a real bed instead of a sleeping bag on a cot."

He shrugged. "It's still punishment."

He reached into the bag he'd been carrying over his shoulder and pulled out a book which he handed over.

"I want this back once you've had a chance to copy it," Jim said sternly. "And don't get caught with it, and *please* don't let anyone find out I gave it to you. Least of all your parents. Or Ron, since he's mad at me for some reason."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "I promise I won't get caught with it or tell anyone that you gave it to me. Or, I suppose, tell anyone that you're an illegal Animagus." Then, she tilted her head thoughtfully. "You seriously don't know why Ron's mad at you?"

Jim shook his head.

"Honestly," she went on. "If I were a Gryffindor, I'd probably smack you on the back of the head, but we Slytherins are too civilized for that. You are Ron's best friend in the entire world. And yet, you ditched him to go off with a girl you transparently have a crush on, and then deliberately put yourself into potential deadly danger while all alone. Do you seriously not realize how protective Ron is of you after all this time?"

The boy winced. "Yeah, I didn't think of it that way. I remember how mad I got at him when he..." Jim paused suddenly "Um, never mind."

Ginny nodded but said nothing. After all, she'd been in the Infirmary with the rest of her family when Jim brought Ron back down from the Astronomy Tower back at the end of her First Year. And unlike all the Gryffindors in her family, she had not shrunk from the implications of what Ron had tried to do.

"Come on," she said while shaking off those morbid thoughts. "Let's head on to the stall. It's the Wimbourne Wasps versus some Peruvian team I've never heard of. So let's go learn how to make Dorset knobs and Peruvian tamales... whatever tamales are, anyway."

Jim laughed, and after Ginny hid the Animagery book away, the two headed off to work.

The Ministry of Magic

Noon

After spending most of the week on his own while dealing with the problem of regurgitating toilets (the product of a mentally addled wizard named Willie Widdershins, who was

now in the Detention Center on charges of Misdemeanor Muggle-baiting), James Potter stepped into the MoM canteen for a quick lunch. Nothing too extravagant-an egg salad sandwich and a pumpkin juice-but it was filling and inexpensive. His days of Apparating to the Leaky Cauldron for lunch every day were over for the time being.

As usual, he sat with Joe Abbott, the building's Squib maintenance man, and a few other low-level Ministry employees who were open to James's presence. Nearby, a group of five Hit Wizards glared at the former Auror with naked contempt, while at another table, Eleanor Burke, his former secretary, gave him a smug, self-satisfied smile before turning to her friends for more lunchtime gossip.

And it was loud gossip too, as Eleanor and her catty friends had very little of an indoor voice when it came to such conversations. Despite himself, James couldn't help but notice, especially when their conversation turned to Bertha Jorkins, who was still absent from work. While the poor woman had apparently been out sick for weeks, none of the women could agree on exactly what her ailment was. Indeed, Eleanor laughingly suggested that Bertha wasn't sick at all, but was entertaining some secret beau, a theory that caused the other women to laugh rudely.

James frowned and then leaned over to Joe Abbott, who seemed to know everything about everyone in the Ministry, though, unlike some people, he kept his thoughts to himself unless asked.

"Bertha Jorkins is still out with illness?" he asked the Squib, who nodded in reply.

"Yep. Contagious too, I hear," Joe added. "I hear she won't even open for visitors. Just talks through the door."

"Uh-huh," James said slowly. "But what is she sick from?"

The others at the table simply shrugged. James slowly chewed his sandwich and swallowed. "And no one's actually seen her in person? Or talked through the Floo?"

"Not so far as I know, Mr. Potter. Why does it trouble you?"

"We're off the clock, Joe. Call me James. And I don't know why it troubles me. Just that it does."

That night...

The "Peruvian team" that Ginny had never heard of turned out to be the Tarapoto Tree-Skimmers, and to the girl's disdain, their obscurity was appropriate given their lack of talent. The Wimbourne Wasps won easily 350-90. While the match wasn't terribly exciting to her, that didn't stop Marcus Flint from screaming like a madman with every goal. He and Emily (who were both off-duty for the night) had accepted an invitation to sit in Harry's box. And to Emily's mortification, the dignified surroundings of a Wizengamot Lord's private box did not prevent Marcus from sitting shirtless for the whole game with his upper body painted yellow and a black "W" covering his chest. Of course, he was hardly the only one so attired, just the only one in the VIP section. The rest of the stadium was awash in yellow and black colors and occasionally a deafening "buzzing" sound from Wimbourne fans whenever the Wasps scored.

"I hope that's not going to hurt his career," Ginny whispered to Harry while gesturing towards Marcus's display. He'd been surprised when the youngest Weasley unexpectedly accepted his open invitation for her entire family to sit with him. Ginny was the only Weasley to do so, as none of her siblings were fans of the Wasps, and after the Bulgaria-

Luxembourg match, everyone else was happy to have a night off. But Harry was even more surprised when Ginny made a point of sitting right beside him instead of with Amy.

Harry laughed as Wimbourne scored again and the half-naked Marcus jumped out of his seat in jubilation while Emily just shrank down further into her chair while covering her face with her hands.

"Marcus has the backing of four Ancient and Noble Houses right now," he said. "Plus, he's doing well in his training, and the Ministry has a critical shortage of Aurors. I'm pretty sure he could be dancing around naked without it affecting his career too much."

She nodded and then, while everyone was distracted by an upcoming penalty shot, she leaned in closer to Harry.

"I need a favor."

Harry crooked an eyebrow. "Oh? Go on."

She reached into her bag and pulled out a small package in green and silver wrapping paper with a lovely bow on top.

"There's a book inside. I'd like you to have one of the grownups in your secret conspiracy that you haven't initiated me into yet take a look at it and see if it's evil or anything. There's been a lot of cursed reading materials floating around in the past few years, if you know what I mean. If it's okay, I'd like you to return it to me along with a copy I can keep after I return the original to the person who loaned it to me. Feel free to keep a copy for yourself, of course. If it's *not* safe, let me know and we'll decide if some sort of *intervention* is needed."

The boy narrowed his eyes. "And what's the name of the possibly cursed book?"

"*Animagery: The Deeper Mysteries*," she replied quietly before standing up to loudly applaud another goal for the Wasps. Harry glared at her as she sat back down.

"You got this from Jim, didn't you?"

"Honestly, Harry. I *promised* not to tell anyone where I got it from or to get caught with it."

"You... promised? But you're already talking about staging an intervention if... well let's just say it, my idiot ex-brother has been reading *another* cursed book!"

"Well, I only *promised*, Harry. I didn't swear an oath or anything. And the way I look at it, I promised not to get caught with it, but simply giving it to someone doesn't count as *getting caught*."

"... I'm interested to hear your reasoning behind that."

She turned to look at him in surprise. "Obviously, *getting caught* is unintentional. This is planned."

"You *planned* to just give me an illegal book in the middle of a crowded Quidditch arena?!"

Ginny shushed him. "Well, it's *wrapped*. And very nicely too if I may say so myself. I told both Amy and Tori earlier this afternoon that I might have a crush on you, and I wondered aloud if you liked poetry. I'm sure they've already spread it to everyone we know, so no one here is curious about the *thoughtful book-shaped gift* I just gave you. Look behind us to your left. Daphne is glaring daggers at me."

Despite himself, he glanced back, and Daphne was indeed fuming for some reason. The Greengrass Heiress quickly looked away. He turned back to Ginny with a suspicious gaze.

"Huh. So why ever do you think Daphne would be upset because you have a crush on me and have given me a book of poems?" he asked archly. Ginny just patted him on the knee.

"Don't ever change, Harry," she said with a chuckle.

24 August 1994

11:55 p.m. (The End of Day 15)

The private tent of Barty Crouch

With a grimace, Barty Crouch threw back the headache remedy followed by a glass of water. Then, he replaced the empty glass on the silver tray held by his house elf, Winky. Nearby Percy tilted his head to study the tiny creature. Like most of his family, he had very little experience with house elves.

"In fact, " he thought, "I probably now have the least experience out of any of my family, except maybe Dad. Ginny, Ron, and the Twins spent the summer at Harry Black's place, and now Mum has Harry's elves working for her! "

He said nothing, however, and merely waited for his boss to acknowledge him... and tried not to think about how much he had in common with the house elf when it came to working for Bartemius Crouch.

"Is Master Barty being hungry, sir? Winky can prepare a midnight snack." The elf looked up at her master with eyes full of devotion.

"No, thank you, Winky," said Crouch with an indulgent smile. "You may return to Crouch Hall until tomorrow morning. Have a good night."

Winky gave a delicate curtsey and then Apparated away, while Percy took a moment to reevaluate his stature. Apparently, Barty Crouch held him in *even lower* regard than a house elf. Finally, Crouch turned around in his swivel chair to face his young intern. Crouch's tent was roughly the size of the Weasley tent, but it only had one occupant, so for the duration of the competition, one of the tent's bedrooms had been converted into an exact copy of Crouch's office at DIMC headquarters. The older wizard glared up over his mahogany desk at Percy and pointedly did not offer him a chair.

"Well, Weatherby?" he snapped. "Give it to me. How bad was it?"

Percy took a deep breath, both to prepare himself to give an unwelcome report and to wash away any resentment over Crouch's continued use of the wrong name for him.

"Bad is a relative term, sir. I suppose it could have been either better or worse. Well over 100 people have been arrested. At least 275 were injured, over twenty seriously enough that they had to be Portkeyed to St. Mungo's for emergency treatment. McAvity has already lodged a formal protest with the ICW *and* requested that Australia send in additional security personnel *"for the safety of the Australian citizens in attendance who are at the mercy of violent British bigotry."*

Crouch snorted loudly at that, but Percy could tell he was upset. The Quidditch World Cup was supposed to be a diplomatic coup, the capstone of Crouch's long career at the Ministry. Instead, it was shaping up to be one of the most controversial Cups in decades if not centuries.

Earlier...

The Australia-Ireland match began at 2:00 p.m. and by 2:15, it was clear that something was terribly wrong. The broom ridden by Roger Chadwick, the Australian Keeper, was obviously malfunctioning and tried to outright buck him off three times before he could call for a timeout, but by then, Ireland was up 90-20 after just fifteen minutes. Things got even more complicated when the referee, Helga Gunnarsdottir, refused to allow him to swap out for a different broom. That was perhaps the *most* controversial call made by the respected Icelandic referee, but by no means the only one. After the match, Percy had the chance to speak with Charlie, the most Quidditch-mad of his siblings (Ginny might well be a better player than Charlie, but she wasn't *mad* about it like most of her brothers). And though Charlie was an Ireland supporter decked out in shamrock green from head to toe, even he was shocked by some of her officiating which he thought showed obvious favoritism.

After an hour of play, Ireland was up 190-50, and it was obvious to everyone (*except* the referee, apparently) that Chadwick's broom had been sabotaged. Since he was unable to effectively defend the Australian goals and forbidden to swap brooms, Chadwick did the only thing he could. He deliberately flew his broom straight into the ground, crashing hard enough to give himself a concussion and remove himself from play.

The Australian reserve Keeper, Martin Scahill, flew out to replace him with a vengeance and managed to keep the Irish nearly scoreless for the next hour, but Gunnarsdottir made up for it with a succession of dubious calls that allowed Ireland to gain another 30 points in penalty shots. At the same time, she simply ignored blatant rule violations by the increasingly aggressive Irish side. At the 3:17 mark, with the score 250-110, the Snitch finally appeared and much closer to the Australian Seeker, Shannon MacReady, than her Irish rival. MacReady was within inches of catching the Snitch and pulling out a spectacular come-from-behind win when one of the Irish Beaters illegally blocked her so hard that the Aussie lass was knocked brutally into a retaining wall.

Naturally, no penalty was called. And worse, while MacReady was trying to right herself, the Irish Seeker was able to catch the Snitch, ending the game with a score of 400-110 for Ireland.

The boos were deafening.

Now...

"The match officially ended at 5:27," said Percy as he continued his report. "The Australian team left the stadium immediately without shaking the hands of the Irish team as is customary. The first fight broke out in the stands just moments later. By eight o'clock, Madam Bones had directed the Aurors working security to don riot gear and to institute a curfew. The huge bonfire that had been set in the Australian sector where transfigured figures depicting Minister Fudge, Referee Gunnarsdottir," Percy coughed delicately, "and yourself were burned in effigy has only just been put out. However, these incidents were not limited to

the Australian sector. Outrage over poor officiating and even possible sabotage is widespread. All the quarterfinalist teams other than Ireland are jointly demanding an inquiry of some kind, and several other sectors report threats of violence against the Irish team and the British government."

The young wizard hesitated. "And while I know you're not... favorably disposed towards the man, Mr. Crouch, I feel I should point out one detail. Things might have been *much* worse had Alexander McAvity not put out a personal appeal for calm among the Australian visitors. In any case, the situation is momentarily under control but remains explosive. And things will probably get worse if analysis shows that Chadwick's broom really was sabotaged."

Crouch grumbled but said nothing about that.

"Any more information about what happened to Jim Potter?" he asked instead.

"Nothing new," Percy replied. "The Australian officials say that they have had their own Aurors investigate the matter, but there's been no sign of Potter's missing wand and no signs of any Australian attendees in Death Eater apparel trying to instigate any trouble. However, Director McAvity has flatly refused to let any British Aurors into the Australian zone to search for clues. And without his permission..."

"We would need approval from the entire QWC organizing committee to go in. Because as far as the ICW is concerned, that little plot of land festooned with Australian flags might as well be on Australian soil given the degree of diplomatic sovereignty it has!"

He reached into a side drawer on his desk and pulled out a snifter of brandy and a single glass. "So do you have any good news for me, Weatherby?" he growled.

Percy looked down impassively at his boss, the one who'd consistently gotten his name wrong since his first day on the job. Then, he recalled that his internship would end in a few weeks, and he wasn't optimistic about getting a favorable recommendation from someone who couldn't even remember his name. So Percy just shrugged casually and said the first thing that came into his mind.

"The Cup is over in three and a half days, and then we'll never have to deal with most of these people again?"

Crouch looked up at the younger wizard in surprise at his seeming impertinence, and his eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to be funny, Weatherby?"

"Humor is often subjective, Mr. Crouch. For example, I've been wondering for some time now whether your deliberate use of the wrong name for me was meant to be a joke or if it had some other purpose. To be honest, I'm still not sure."

The old wizard took a sip of brandy while studying his aide. "Bold of you to assume it was deliberate and not an honest mistake on my part."

"Respectfully, Mr. Crouch, you had no problem calling me by my proper name when I interviewed with you, and you are perfectly aware of who my father is. I have, after all, seen you effortlessly recall the names of the Bulgarian Minister's grandchildren, so I think you would recall the fact that you hired Arthur Weasley's son as your assistant. And even if you hadn't asked after him and my mother during my interview, well sir, *hair like mine* is a rather clear sign of my parentage, don't you agree?"

Crouch stared intently at Percy before suddenly barking out a laugh. He gestured wandlessly at a nearby chair, and it

slid over next to Percy. Then, Crouch reached into the drawer again to pull out a second glass.

"Have a seat... *Weasley*. "

Percy crooked an eyebrow but then sat down without speaking. Crouch poured him a glass of brandy and slid it over. He took the glass cautiously, but then Crouch raised his own glass into the air while making a toast.

"To diplomacy!" he said before taking a stiff drink. Percy took a smaller sip and then coughed at the burning sensation.

"So, *Weasley*, why do you think I have been misidentifying you all this time?"

The young wizard shrugged. "I assume it was some sort of test, though I confess I don't know what I was being tested on. But... you just had me toast to '*diplomacy*,' so I suppose you might have wanted to see if I could keep my temper in the face of provocation."

"Well reasoned. And for the record, you passed. The DIMC is the Ministry's diplomatic corps, and I am its chief diplomat. Your internship is just for the summer, but I *need* a full-time aide. However, it's got to be someone who can handle arrogant old fools *just like me* with tact and grace despite whatever personal desire you might have to hex us when we offend you. But at the same time, I don't need a Yes Man who's afraid to tell me when I'm in the wrong. I've been waiting all summer to see when and how you would finally confront me over all that Weatherby nonsense. You never once considered correcting me in front of anyone else when it might cause me embarrassment. And when you finally did confront me over it," Crouch gave a predatory smile, "you did so at a time of maximum crisis when firing my personal assistant for impertinence was a non-starter."

Percy looked at the older man in confusion. "So it was a test... to see if I was qualified for a full-time position in the DIMC? That is, assuming you don't fire me for impertinence once the present crisis is over?"

Crouch laughed again. "No, Weasley, I'm not firing you. Or at least not for anything you've done so far. Hell, you kept me from losing my temper around Alexander McAvity, and for that, you probably deserve a raise."

Percy studied Crouch carefully. "If you don't mind my asking, sir... Your dislike for McAvity... It's *personal*, isn't it." It was not a question.

Crouch nodded slowly and took another sip of brandy. "Understand, Weasley, I am not a bigot against Muggleborns and never have been. I am something of a traditionalist when it comes to Pureblood culture, but in the beginning, I thought McAvity and Minister Leach had some good ideas. But I worried. Worried that they were pushing too hard and too fast. And that they were creating something they might not be able to control. Then, Leach died and McAvity fled the country, and my worst fears came to pass. In 1957, a Muggleborn named Martha Bracewell set off a Muggle explosive device at the Marriage Contract Registry Office."

He paused to collect himself. "My first wife, Elaine, worked there. And died there."

Percy swallowed. "I'm so sorry to hear that."

"Ours was not a happy marriage, Weasley... *Percy*. Quite the opposite. In a way, it was ironic that she died in that office, given the role that marriage contracts played in our lives. Our marriage was arranged when we were both small children. At Hogwarts, Elaine and I never got along. But we both assumed that once we were married, Amortentia would

take care of things, only to find out that I was deathly allergic to one of the ingredients in that potion and could not imbibe it. Still, we did our duty, and she gave me four strong children who were each a credit to House Crouch."

He barked out an unhappy laugh. "A few years after she died in that terrorist bombing, I remarried, the second time for love with my former school sweetheart, and Melinda gave me a fifth child. And the child of the woman I loved grew up to be a Death Eater who helped kill the children of the woman I... was married to. But even that can be traced back to McAvity, I think. To this day, I firmly believe that if the Muggleborn activists hadn't turned to violence, hadn't *frightened* the Purebloods into overreacting, You-Know-Who would have never become the danger he was."

The young man said nothing in response. After months of Crouch alternating between cold indifference and surly anger over his intern's minor mistakes, Percy was unprepared to hear Bartemius Crouch bare his soul over a glass of brandy. Then, Crouch looked over at him speculatively.

"Do you have anyone in your life, Percy? An arranged relationship or the real thing?"

Percy looked down at his glass. "Neither. There was someone, but we broke up... when I took this job."

"Ah, the Clearwater girl. So unfortunate."

"Mr. Crouch," Percy said slowly. "*Did* you hire me over her and Bobby Lattimer because of... blood status?"

"Yes," Crouch said flatly.

"... Oh."

The older man exhaled heavily. "But not *just* blood status, I assure you. In my opinion, for nearly all Ministry jobs, blood status should be unimportant, and Wizarding Britain would be better served with a meritocracy. If I were still DMLE director, I'd have been happy to hire Clearwater or Lattimer for an important posting. But as I said, the DIMC is a *diplomatic post*. With the Cup and *especially* with the Triwizard Tournament coming up, I simply couldn't risk offending participating governments by sending a Muggleborn as my representative. Of course, I also rejected applicants from old Pureblood families for the same reason! Consider the nations to be represented in the Triwizard Tournament, Percy. France is a Muggle-friendly nation that's gotten rid of all its Purebloods, while the Balkan Alliance has a reactionary government run by Purebloods who have gotten rid of all their Muggleborns. I needed someone who could walk in *both* worlds."

He raised his glass again, as if in salute to Percy Weasley. "And who better than a brilliant young man from a Pureblood family in the Sacred 28 but who nevertheless took Muggle Studies all the way to a NEWT and whose *father* is the Ministry's most infamous Mugglephile! You were the perfect choice for this internship. And if you want it, you'll be the perfect choice for a permanent job as my personal assistant."

Percy's eyes widened at the offer of a permanent, high-level job offer. But then, Crouch laughed once more.

"That is, assuming this bloody World Cup thing doesn't blow up so badly that Fudge fires me. In which case, you can ask your mum if she'd be willing to hire me on as a sous-chef!"

26 August 1994, Day 17

(The Montrose Magpies v. the Wollongong (MCA) Warriors Exhibition Match)

Despite his best efforts, Oliver Wood's hands shook as he fumbled his way into his Keeper's pads. The last few days had been a whirlwind of madness as the controversies surrounding the World Cup deepened. The riots after Australia's loss to Ireland had been worse than anything the QWC had seen in this century, and the mood only worsened on Thursday morning, when the Daily Prophet published the results of the preliminary investigation into what had happened to Roger Chadwick's broom during the match. Those results were inconclusive due to the damage inflicted on the broom when Chadwick crashed it, which meant that no one was satisfied.

That night, Oliver attended the exhibition match between Puddlemere United and the Vratsa Vultures. While Oliver was excited to see his favorite team in action, he was unnerved by the crowd's response. Puddlemere United wasn't just the most beloved of the British home teams, it was admired by Quidditch fans around the world, not just for its play but for its members' involvement in various charities and in supporting youth Quidditch programs across the Magical world. Certainly, its reputation in the global Quidditch community far exceeded that of the Vultures, who rarely even played outside the Balkan Alliance. So naturally, the Puddlemere players were taken aback by the most hostile crowd most of them had ever seen. There were over 100,000 wizards and witches in the stadium, and easily 4 out of 5 of them came prepared to loudly boo everything Puddlemere did. Apparently, with Australia eliminated (and under admittedly dodgy circumstances), the rest of the world had become supporters of all things Bulgarian.

Puddlemere won, of course, but Oliver could tell that the team was shaken by the unexpected crowd response to its victory. Oliver was uneasy as well, because the next night, his own team, the Magpies, was scheduled to play against the top Australian league team and reigning champion of the Oceanic League, the Wollongong Warriors. He had no idea how quickly unease would blossom into terror and outrage.

Earlier this morning, just after dawn, Jeremy Crick, the Magpies' starting Keeper, and a man who'd become Oliver's mentor and friend, had been found in the woods at the edge of the campsite, severely beaten and heavily cursed. Crick had swiftly been transported morning to St. Mungo's where his physical injuries were quickly healed. But the mental trauma from the spell damage was more severe, and the Healers indicated that he would need to be hospitalized for weeks to come while they tried to unravel the severe and complex Confundus Curse he was laboring under.

Specifically, Jeremy Crick, one of the top ranked Keepers in the world, now had a pathological fear of flying.

Hence the mounting panic that now threatened to make Oliver Wood vomit onto the locker room floor in front of all his teammates, all of whom were trying to be encouraging even though their lack of faith in him was apparent. In less than twenty minutes, Oliver Wood would make his professional debut as Keeper for the Magpies in front of an insanely hostile crowd and against a championship-caliber team that was out for blood with the honor of British Quidditch at stake.

Then, the door opened, and Oliver's eyes widened. As if he didn't have enough to worry about, the Magpies' owner, Antonius Warrington, had entered the locker room to give

some encouragement to the team. At the end of a brief pep talk to the whole group, he whispered a few words to the coach and then made his way over to Oliver.

"I know you have a lot on your mind, Wood," Warrington said while putting a hand on Oliver's shoulder. "But might I have a moment with you in private?"

"O-o-of course, Lord Warrington," the young Keeper stammered.

The older man smiled warmly. "When it's just us, Oliver, you can call me Antonius."

With that, he led Oliver out of view of the rest of the team and erected a privacy shield.

"How are you holding up, son?" Antonius asked with eyes full of concern.

"I'm... fine, sir. I mean... Antonius. Just a few pregame jitters."

"I think it's more than that Oliver. I'm sure you must feel the weight of the world on your shoulders. It's not just about your debut as Keeper anymore. This is about the honor of our team and our nation. And it's about avenging a base and cowardly attack on one of our own."

Warrington's eyes flashed angrily. "I had a chance to speak briefly with Jeremy this afternoon. He asked me to wish you the best of luck. But I also spoke to his Healers. They... they don't know if he's ever going to fly again!"

Oliver gasped in anguish.

"There's more," Warrington continued. "While Jeremy's memories are still hazy and he couldn't make out his attackers' faces... they were definitely wearing green-and-yellow Australian jerseys!"

He sneered angrily. "You know the ones I mean, Oliver. The shirts with 'McA' on the front!"

Oliver's own eyes flashed in outrage. "I promise you, Antonius. We're going to beat the bastards!"

Warrington shook his head. "It's your first professional game, Oliver. You're good, very good, but untested. And the Wollongong Chasers are some of the best in the world. But more than that, I don't just want to beat the Australians, I want to humiliate them!"

The young athlete nodded slowly. "So... what do you want me to do?"

The team owner said nothing. He simply reached into a pocket and withdrew a tiny vial containing no more than half a thimbleful of what a layman would have thought to be liquid gold.

Wood's eyes widened, and he looked around wildly to make sure no one was close enough to see. "That's... that's illegal to use in Quidditch," he whispered.

"Illegal in competition play, Oliver. This is just an exhibition match. And after one side has crippled a player on the other, honestly, how big of a sin is three drops of Felix Felicis?"

27 August 1994 (The Morning of the Final)

From the Daily Prophet

SHOCKING UPSET!

Magpies crush Warriors 230 to ZERO

Reserve Keeper Holds Aussie Team Scoreless

In Stunning Debut Performance!

Sore Loser Aussies Launch

Baseless Accusations of Cheating!

As Oliver read the Prophet headline praising his performance and hailing him as "the future of British Quidditch," conflicting emotions surged through his mind. Happiness at being nationally recognized for his skills (even if they were artificially enhanced). Anxiety that he might not be able to live up to the impossible standards he'd set against the Warriors. Grim satisfaction over avenging the injuries suffered by his friend and teammate. Worry that somehow his use of Felix Felicis would be discovered. Shame that he'd even taken the magical luck-enhancing elixir that had been banned in competitive Quidditch almost since the potion's invention. Every time he'd blocked the Quaffle, even as the British fans roared their approval, Oliver could only imagine McGonagall's disappointed scowl.

But the most worrisome emotion of all threatened to overwhelm the others: an acute awareness of how amazing it felt to play while under the potion's effects combined with an aching desire to feel that way again.

A small cottage in Swindon, just after noon...

For the past few days, James had continually found himself distracted for reasons he couldn't articulate. Despite the

obvious antipathy that the man had held for him over the last years of his life, James wished that Rufus Scrimgeour was still around to talk to.

"Or better yet, to be in charge of things," James thought ruefully.

He was troubled because there was something bothering him, something to do with Bertha Jorkins, but he couldn't figure out what it was. And in his mind's eye, he could just imagine Rufus instantly knowing the answer before making James feel like an idiot for not seeing it. Now that it was far, far too late, Potter finally realized what he'd missed out on by not trying to develop a better relationship with the old man and learn from one of the best.

Finally, James decided that even if he was no longer an Auror, he was still a DMLE agent (for the loosest possible definition of agent, of course). And while he was not authorized to formally conduct investigations, there was nothing to forbid him from dropping in to visit a sick friend.

"Well, " he thought as he reached for the Ministry directory containing the contact information for all Ministry employees, "I've spoken to Bertha Jorkins at least a dozen or so times over the last ten years. That counts as friendship, right? "

Moments later, there was a soft pop in front of Bertha Jorkins' cottage in Swindon. Swiftly, James looked around to make sure he'd not been seen. No one was about, so he casually made his way up the path to the cottage door and knocked.

"Bertha?" he said through the door after a brief pause. "It's James Potter. I hope you don't mind, but lots of people at the

Ministry have been concerned about you, so I thought I'd pop by and check on you."

Several seconds passed.

"Are you sure I can't come in for a bit and visit? It might cheer you up."

Several more seconds passed.

"Contagious, huh? And Spattergroit? Yeah, I'd heard that, but no one was sure what you had. Yes, Spattergroit is nothing to take lightly."

A few more seconds.

"Alright then, I'll let you get back to bed, Bertha. I hope you get better soon."

With that, James turned away from the door and strode down the garden pathway only to stop halfway to the street. Then, his eyes widened in sudden understanding. He'd never been a good student of Occlumency, but there were other techniques taught to Aurors for psychic defense, and once he'd moved far enough from the doorway, one of those techniques alerted him to what had just happened.

James whirled around and cast a quick *Homenum Revelio* at the cottage, followed by a succession of other identification spells. One of them caused a series of glowing runes to appear over the door to the cottage.

"Bloody hell," James whispered to himself before running back to the door and hitting it with his strongest Unlocking Charm. The door flew open, and James stepped inside only to freeze as he took in the scene. The door opened into the kitchen, and there was still a plate of half-eaten food on the

table, now moldy and spoiled. Further inside, he could see signs of a struggle, including a chair that had been knocked over and a vase that had fallen to the ground and shattered. After a quick search of the cottage to confirm that Bertha Jorkins was not present (whether alive or dead), James made his way to the fireplace and tossed in some Floo Powder.

"CHIEF AUROR'S OFFICE!"

The Office of Chief Auror Amelia Bones

1:00 p.m.

"I'm still waiting for an explanation of why you chose to look into this, Potter!" Corban Yaxley snapped. "I find it unlikely that any misuse of Muggle artifacts case justified you breaking into Bertha Jorkins' private home!"

James refused to be cowed by his superior. "I was off-duty, Director Yaxley. Several fellow Ministry personnel had expressed concerns about Bertha's health considering how long she'd been absent from work. So I took it upon myself to pay her a visit this morning and see if she was okay."

Yaxley started to argue, but Barty Crouch interrupted him. "And I, for one, am grateful for your initiative, James. But since some of us have only just arrived, please explain the results of your investigation."

The DMLE Director glared at the older wizard, who practically sneered in response. After all, Crouch did technically outrank Yaxley, and his feelings about people who had taken the Dark Mark while "*under the Imperius Curse*" were well-known. Also in the room were Amelia Bones, Minister Fudge, and DMGS Director Ludo Bagman,

the last of whom looked like his nerves were shot. James continued his report.

"Upon arrival at the Jorkins residence, I knocked on the door and had what I thought was a brief conversation with Jorkins. However, I've had training in resisting Confundus Charms, and once I moved far enough away from the door, I realized that at no point had I actually heard Jorkins speak. My mind had simply inserted responses appropriate to my questions. I confirmed magically that there was no one in the house and also that the door itself was a focus for a powerful and sophisticated Confundus meant to make anyone who came by believe that Jorkins was safe inside. I then entered the cottage..."

"Which you had no authority to do!" Yaxley said angrily. "You are not an Auror anymore, Potter!"

"No sir, I am not," James replied evenly. "But the Law Enforcement Reform Act of 1823 allows any DMLE personnel to enter a private dwelling if they have genuine reason to believe that a wizard or witch inside may be in danger or be the victim of a crime. I judged that the presence of a Confundus Charm on Jorkins' front door intended to divert anyone who came to check up on a witch who'd been missing from work for several weeks was a sound basis for investigation."

"And I agree with your reasoning, James," Amelia said firmly before Yaxley could open his mouth.

"Thank you, Chief Auror. Anyway, once inside, I found signs of a struggle but no signs at all of Bertha Jorkins, at which point I immediately contacted your office."

Nearby, Cornelius Fudge was rubbing his temples as he wondered which of the people in the room would make the

best scapegoat for everything that had gone wrong in the last week. On the bright side, he had no shortage of candidates. If it came down to it, he could probably just blame it all on McAvity (assuming McAvity wasn't actually the real guilty party).

"So where does this leave us?" he asked. "Bertha Jorkins has apparently been kidnapped, possibly some time ago. Do we at least know when she was last seen?"

"The last time I saw her was around the 7th," said Bagman. "She was overseeing the placement of the markers that divided the different sections of the campgrounds so that visitors from the different participating nations would know where to set up camp.

"Wonderful. She's been missing for almost three weeks and no one had a clue! Do we have any leads on finding her?"

"The investigation has only begun," Amelia said, "but so far no. And considering how cold the trail is, I don't know if I can spare any Aurors to investigate until after the Cup Final."

"There is another factor to consider," James spoke up. "Bertha Jorkins was the liaison between the DIMC and the DMGS for everything related to the World Cup. She knew all the security details, and as Ludo said, she personally installed the zone markers that separate the foreign and domestic attendees into their respective sectors. Also, her biomagical signature is the key to the wards surrounding the Goblet of Fire. Is there any chance that her kidnapping was related to any or all of that? And if so, what do we do about it?"

"The Goblet of Fire has been in position for nearly two weeks without incident," Yaxley said blandly. "And it will be

removed tomorrow. I think we can exclude it as a reason for Jorkins' disappearance, don't you agree?"

"But there is likely some target to be concerned about, I think," said Amelia. "Who all knew that Jorkins was in charge of security?"

"It was hardly a secret," said Crouch. "In fact, she was also the liaison with most of the foreigners. Though with everything that's been going on, Ludo and I have upped the security for the VIP box, at least. We had some biomagical identification cards put together that will be passed out this afternoon."

"Which is good news for 300 or so dignitaries out of a total attendance of over 100,000." Amelia sighed in annoyance. "At this point, I see little we can do except send out a bulletin to all security personnel at the stadium to stay on alert." She looked over to Fudge. "Assuming, of course, that I can't get authority to delay the Final pending a sweep of the grounds?"

A derisive laugh was Fudge's only response.

As the group was leaving, Yaxley called out to James.

"In light of these developments, Potter, I am putting you on the Jorkins case. Go back to her house and do a more thorough sweep. Then, contact her known friends and associates to see if that turns up any other leads."

"Are you sure you don't want me at the stadium for extra security?" the ex-Auror asked.

"I think you've done enough freelancing for the time being, Potter," Yaxley said biting. "We have plenty of security

onsite already. You have your orders. Carry them out."

"Yes, sir," Potter nodded tersely. Yaxley stormed off. James watched him leave through narrowed eyes before he finally headed off in the other direction to continue his investigation... after making one quick Floo call.

The BMW Tent

3:00 p.m.

With just hours to go before the Final match, the inhabitants of the BMW tent (which included the Blacks, the Malfoys, the Wilkeses, the Grangers, and one No-Name) were lounging in a common area before heading over to the stadium for their last chance to pick up souvenirs. Harry took the opportunity to ask about an unrelated matter since he happened to have a Charms Master on hand.

"Mr. Malfoy, by any chance are you familiar with a Charm called Protego Mutandis?"

Lucius thought for a moment. "I would not say I'm familiar with it, though I am aware of its existence. It was an attempted modification of the Protego Orbis, except that instead of encasing something in a protective bubble, it creates a shield which conforms to the general shape of the object or person protected. But it was not terribly effective for most practical purposes. Protego Orbis was far superior for protecting inanimate objects, and Protego Mutandis greatly reduced the mobility of living creatures shielded by it. After the development of the Vestamentarum Shield in the 1780s, it fell out of favor completely. Today, it's mainly a historical curiosity. Why do you ask?"

"It's for an enchantment project I've been working on. Viktor Krum suggested I look into it."

Draco laughed. "Only you would meet up with Viktor Krum at a party and spend the whole time talking about runes instead of Quidditch!"

Before Harry could respond, Lemmy, one of Lucius's house elves, announced that there was a visitor, and Archie went to see who it was.

"Knock, knock!" came a cheerful voice a few minutes later. It was Ludo Bagman, escorted by an annoyed-looking Archie.

"Bagman," drawled Lucius Malfoy. "What a... pleasant surprise. What brings you by? I'd have thought that on the day of the Final, you would actually have some work to do."

"Well, yes!" Ludo beamed, Malfoy's sarcasm apparently lost on him. "In fact, it's work that's brought me by."

The Director of the Department of Magical Games and Sports reached into a bag slung over his shoulder to produce a number of 3×5 inch cards.

"What with all the shenanigans going on betwixt us and all those foreigners, it's been decided to up the security for the Final for the Ministry's most special guests. Everyone who'll be sitting in the VIP needs to get one of these tickets or you won't be allowed in."

Bagman quickly made his way around the table, handing out the seemingly blank cards.

"Everyone just touch your wand to the card and say your name," he said. Sirius was the first to do so, and instantly, the card transfigured itself to show his name and face. Most

of the others quickly followed suit, but Archie hesitated. Meanwhile, Dan Granger raised his hand.

"Um, no wand here. What am I supposed to do?"

Ludo looked at him in confusion. "And... you are?"

"This is Dan, my Squib cousin from Canada," said Sirius easily. "No wand for him."

Bagman frowned. "Um, I'm sorry, Lord Black. I wasn't aware there would be any Squibs in the VIP section. Or, you know, *anywhere* at the Final."

Archie spoke up suddenly. "I won't be sitting in the VIP section either, I'll be sitting with... friends."

Harry looked at Archie in surprise, but then he realized—none of them knew exactly how these security cards worked, but the process might well involve biomagical signatures, which Metamorphmagery couldn't fool. If that were the case and Archie touched his wand to the card, it might well identify him by name and face as Regulus Black!

"Mind if I join you, Goodwin?" Dan asked with a smile. "Not that I'm not very grateful for your hospitality, Mr. Malfoy, but it might be interesting to meet some regular wizards and witches instead of hobnobbing with the elites."

"I'd be delighted to have you along," Archie said with a forced smile. He'd wait until Bagman left to discuss with Sirius and Harry the wisdom of taking the Muggle along with him. Most likely followed by explaining to said Muggle that they would, in fact, be sitting with *the Australians*.

The VIP Dining Area

5:00 p.m. (one hour before the start of the match)

The VIP box for the World Cup Final held seats for 300 people. Among its other amenities, the box connected to a banquet hall where the luminaries could grab snacks before and/or during the Final. The catering for this hall had been done by Summerisles, which meant that (in Harry's biased opinion) everything was overpriced and not nearly as good as what Molly Weasley put out. In light of the mounting tensions between the Irish fans and, well, *everyone else*, Molly had closed her stall today and returned to the Burrow, happy at her success but glad to be done with catering for a while.

An hour before the Final was set to begin, Jim Potter passed through the VIP entrance, handing the ticket containing his name and picture to the security staff as he did. Once inside, the Boy-Who-Lived made his way through the banquet hall towards the VIP box. He wasn't hungry at the moment, but he did see someone he wanted to meet.

"Excuse me, Mr. Diggory?" Jim asked cautiously from behind the bureaucrat.

"Merlin's beard," said Amos Diggory, his eyes widening. "Jim Potter?"

"Yes, sir," the boy nodded. He was pretty sure he'd met Cedric's father at some Ministry function or other, but he didn't think they'd ever spoken before. "And hello to you too, Cedric," he added to the young Hufflepuff standing next to his father.

"Hello, Jim," Cedric said with an easy grin. "Enjoying the Cup so far?"

"Yeah, it's been brilliant. Well, except for all the controversy and... stuff."

"Yes," said the elder Diggory. "Nasty business all that. Still, what can you expect from foreigners."

Then, the older man smiled down at Jim somewhat condescendingly. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Mr. Potter. Ced's talked about you, of course. Told us all about playing against you last year... I said to him, I said-Ced, that's something to tell your grandchildren some day! You beat Jim Potter!"

Jim smiled tightly. "That he did, Mr. Diggory. Your son's an excellent Seeker."

The compliment did nothing to erase the look of complete mortification on Cedric's face, though Jim couldn't tell whether it was due to Cedric's father trying to get one over on the Boy-Who-Lived or simply the implication that winning a school Quidditch match would be the high point of the boy's life.

"Jim fell off his broom, Dad," Cedric muttered. "During a *Dementor attack*."

"Yes, but *you* didn't fall off, did you?" Amos roared genially, while slapping his son on the back. "Always modest, our Ced, always the gentleman... but the best man won. I'm sure Jim would say the same, wouldn't you, eh? One falls off his broom, one stays on! You don't need to be a genius to tell which one's the better flier!"

Amos laughed loudly while his son looked as though he were praying for the floor to open up and swallow him.

"... Indeed," Jim said. His smile was starting to hurt a little.

"*Dad... !*" Cedric said almost miserably.

The elder Diggory looked over to his son with a suddenly firm glare. "Don't whine, Cedric. It's undignified. And don't slouch, either! And for Merlin's sake, learn to accept a compliment when it's given and stand up for yourself. You'll never be Minister for Magic if you don't start showing some self-confidence!"

Cedric looked pained. "Yes, sir," he said quietly. Then, he inhaled deeply and put on a smile that Jim suddenly realized was as fake as his own. "Say, Dad, I'm going to get another butterbeer. Would you like me to get you one as well?"

"No, no," Amos said. "I'm too old for butterbeers. Get me another whiskey and tonic, would you, son?"

Cedric winced and glanced down at the alcoholic drink already in his father's hand.

"Coming right up," he finally said with another fake smile before turning and walking off. Jim hesitated, not sure what to make of Cedric's expression or his sudden insight into the Diggory family dynamics.

"Mr. Diggory..."

"Please, lad! Call me Amos!" *Amos* clapped Jim firmly on the shoulder.

"Certainly... Amos. I was wondering... if I remember correctly, you're pretty high up in the Department for the Control and Regulation of Magical Creatures, right?"

"Close," Amos said with a smug laugh. "It's the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. You can't have Control without Regulations, I always say!"

Jim forced out a chuckle. "Ha, ha... yeah. So, um, if I might ask... what exactly do you do there?"

"Well, my official title is Assistant Director for Regulatory Enforcement. Basically, I oversee those divisions of the DRCMC who are responsible for dealing with Beings, Beasts, and Spirits who are acting in contravention of Ministry regs. Rounding them up for containment and transport, and then deciding if Walden McNair needs to be brought in."

Jim nodded, even though he had no idea who Walden McNair was. "Beings, Beasts... and *Spirits* ." He took a deep breath. "That includes *ghosts*, right?"

6:30 (*Thirty minutes into the Final match*)

Tiberius Nott pulled out a hip flask and threw back a slug of whiskey to calm his nerves. His part in The Plan was not vital, but he still needed to impress the Dark Lord with his execution of it. More importantly, his wife Narcissa thought it was *very* vital, and that made it a priority in the besotted man's eyes.

While it was probably just paranoia, Nott couldn't help but worry that, for some reason, he was not as high in Lord Voldemort's estimation as others in the Inner Circle. Silly really, since out of that illustrious group, only Narcissa, Barty Jr., and the Dark Lord himself could boast blood as pure as his own. But still, the worry persisted, along with the fear that failure on this mission, despite its "non-vital" nature, might make his fears come true.

Then, he jumped slightly and gave an expletive at the soft chime that sounded from a small box resting on a nearby table. Nott shook his head to clear it.

"Get a hold of yourself, man," he muttered to himself. "Just a few more hours, and it'll be over. And then, Narcissa will... reward you."

Nott opened the box. Inside was an envelope containing a note and three small cards. The note read:

Nimrod,

Biomagical signatures for Targets 4, 5, and 6 are attached.

Good hunting.

January

Each of the three cards bore a picture and a name: Amaryllis Wilkes, Harry Black, and Sirius Black. And each still bore the faint traces of their respective wands... and their owners' magical signatures. Nott removed the cards and carried them over to a large and seemingly empty cage on the opposite side of the tent. He laid the three identity cards down and carefully slid them through the bars of the cage.

"Sköll! Hati!" he snapped.

The cage might have looked empty, but suddenly, there were *sounds*. Low guttural growls that might have come from two enormous and dangerous dogs but were actually from something much worse. Despite himself, Tiberius Nott shivered at the sound, but he fought down the instinctive fear. Nott's most beloved hunting beasts knew their master's magic, after all, and would never harm him.

The Muggles of the North of England had legends about terrible hellhounds they called Barghests, most likely born of garbled tales about encounters between Muggles and Grims or other magical canids. But the first true Barghests worthy

of the name to walk on British soil had been gifts to Nott's grandfather from Grindelwald himself, magical canines bred through the dark magic that Grindelwald stole from Lady Echidna before her fall. Each Barghest was the result of crossbreeding between a boarhound and a Tebo, which was a species of magical warthog indigenous to Africa that was blessed with magic resistant skin and natural invisibility. The Barghests inherited those traits, as well as a preternatural ability to recognize the scent of a wizard's magic and track him effortlessly by its signature.

That was why Nott-who, frankly, was not a terribly brave man-had no fear of the savage beasts he had brought in secret to the World Cup. Intelligent and well-trained, the Barghests knew the magic of the House of Nott and would never harm or disobey a wizard of their line. Nor had they ever failed to hunt down their quarry, as Tiberius knew well from the Muggle-hunting excursions his father and grandfather had taken him on in his youth.

"Here, my boys. Drink in the scent of your prey." He tapped each card in turn, starting with the two schoolchildren.

"These two, you can harm but not kill. At least, not yet." Then, he tapped the picture of Sirius Black.

"That one... you can *devour* !"

The growls of the invisible beasts intensified, and, seemingly from nowhere, a string of drool appeared in mid-air and slowly dripped down to the floor of the cage. It sizzled when it hit. Tiberius laughed darkly.

"Peter Pettigrew says that Sirius Black can turn into a big black dog and likes to fancy himself as a hellhound," he said to his most beloved hunting dogs. "He has *no idea* ."

Next: The Death Eaters Attack!

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2: What the Sinister Man is reading.

Wrath and Remorse by Frickles. The sequel to A Simple Act of Vengeance.

they say they saw him with a gun by elijahs. A Marauders-era AU fic in which Voldemort takes an unhealthy interest in a young Sirius Black to the dismay of Sirius and everyone who cares about him.

Parchment by silver-drip (on AO3). A WBWL fic with an angry, genderfluid Metamorph Harry, a confused brother, and a broken but basically good James Potter who's trying desperately to keep it together.

the love we deserve by txddylxpin (on AO3). In something of a plot contrivance, Albus gets the Potters to make Snape their Secret Keeper, and he immediately sells them out. Lily sacrifices herself, but James lives and raises Harry with the help of all the Marauders (including Good!Peter).

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: Asmund, BlueWater5, Bob, Darkarus, Professor of Runes, Deprazo, EssayOfThoughts | Aich, Justanother random human, kean, Krisni, LFGB, Mr. Nemo, PrettyPinkCupcake, Rubric of Ahriman, Sakkiko, Sandyna (Melanie), Sigurd,

SwordOfRome, vaibhavi, village idiot, and Webstriker|Datti.
Thanks, guys!

AN4: The part of Antonius Warrington will henceforth be played by Karl Urban. I am seriously considering casting Tom Holland as Cassius because I have never seen Holland in a villain role but think he would be great at it.

AN5: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 16,692. Followers: 17,587. Favorites: 15,811. Communities: 240. Discord followers: 4346! Go Team POS!

The Quidditch World Cup, part 5

Chapter 12: The Quidditch World Cup, part 5

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Harry Black

and the Resurrection Game

Harry Potter and all associated characters and situations are the property of J.K. Rowling. I make no claim to ownership.

Chapter 12: The Quidditch World Cup (Part 5)

After the Final

The 1994 World Quidditch Cup ended after just over four hours with a win for Ireland-170 to 160 over Bulgaria. While the score was close, it was a devastating loss for the young Bulgarian Seeker. Viktor Krum caught the Snitch, but too late, ending the game barely a second after Ireland had scored what would be the game-winning goal. In the boy's defense, he'd taken a Bludger blow to the head less than a minute earlier, and in his disorientation, he had not realized that the Irish had pulled ahead to a Seeker-proof lead. Of course, the match's outcome had hardly been in doubt. The Bulgarian Chasers had fought valiantly but were clearly no match for Ireland playing on what was considered its home turf despite the decidedly anti-British crowd, and the Irish Keeper, in particular, played the best game of his career.

Ironically, Bulgaria's biggest problem might well have been with its *mascots*. The wild Veela were already agitated by the enormous crowd, and Ireland's Leprechaun mascots seemed to have a knack for provoking them. Consequently, nearly half of Ireland's final score resulted from penalty shots awarded for the Veelas' continual interference with the match, culminating in the bird-women storming the pitch en masse and shooting a barrage of fireballs at the Leprechauns and the Irish players alike, not to mention their earlier attempt to *seduce* the referee. In any case, had Krum not caught the Snitch, Lynch, the Irish Seeker, certainly would have, and the Finals would have ended with a humiliating 320-10 loss instead.

"At least Krum lost on his own terms," Harry reassured a disconsolate Draco.

Despite the Veela issues, the match had otherwise been relatively clean (at least compared to the various outrages from earlier in the tournament). Afterwards, the majority of the crowd was sullen but nevertheless respectful of the well-earned Irish victory. Viktor Krum was given a standing ovation, which he acknowledged with a thumbs-up gesture even as he was carried off the field in a stretcher for medical treatment, and the rest of the Bulgarians stoically shook the hands of the victorious Irish.

As the crowd exited the stadium, Harry and his friends, family, and peers had a brief rendezvous. Archie Goodwin and Dan Granger had apparently made several new friends from among the Australian fans despite their citizenship, and they both stated a desire to visit the Australian section of the campsite. Hermione regarded her father's announcement somewhat dubiously before insisting that she would be coming along. Her expression brooked no argument, so Sirius led the other children (Harry, Theo,

Neville, and Amy) back to the BMW tent without her. Archie assured them all that he would look after the Muggleborn witch and her Muggle father.

Meanwhile, Draco informed Lucius that he wanted to visit the Bulgarian section to see his friend, Viktor Krum, and the elder Malfoy acquiesced. As it happened, Lucius was quite impressed with Krum's performance and had his own reason for meeting the young man who'd been so helpful to his son at Durmstrang. He'd been considering purchasing a Quidditch team at some point in the near future if only to shut up Antonius Warrington's preening about his precious Montrose Magpies, and he wondered how amenable Krum would be to moving to Britain.

As it happened, the Malfoys would not be the only ones visiting that part of the campsite. Just moments earlier, a silvery doe Patronus sent by Lily Potter had appeared to Arthur Weasley to both apologize and to inform him that she would be a bit late picking up the Boy-Who-Lived from the Weasley tent.

"*Midnight*, " the doe had said. "*Twelve-thirty at the latest*. "

Since he would have some extra time to kill, Jim immediately asked Arthur if he and Ron could make a quick run by the Bulgarian sector, ostensibly so that Ron could get Krum's autograph, which the boy had failed to do at the party the week before. Ron looked at Jim in surprise before going along with whatever his best mate was after. Arthur looked doubtful until Ginny stepped forward with wide eyes and expressed her own desire to meet Viktor Krum. After looking back and forth between his two youngest children, the Weasley patriarch finally gave in. To his surprise, none of his other four sons had any desire for anything other than bed,

so he told Bill to lead Charlie and the Twins back to their tent and that he would bring the younger children back later.

Bill did as his father instructed... until after Arthur and his young charges were out of sight. Then, he turned to his siblings.

"Right. Charlie, you get the Twins back to the tent. I need to run an errand."

"What sort of errand?" Charlie asked in confusion. The Twins both laughed. For once it was easy to tell them apart due to the T-shirt George was proudly wearing, the one that read "*My Twin Brother is Smarter and Better-Looking*," a testament to Fred's Outstanding on his Potions OWL. It was the only class where Fred outdid George, but that was enough to win their bet.

"I reckon Big Brother Billy wants to head over to Little Australia..." said George.

"And find that lovely Aussie lass he danced with at the Malfoy bash!" added Fred.

"Very romantic, eh, Fred?" George continued happily. It had been a while since they'd been able to do *twin-speak* like this. "Prince Charming running after his Cinderella."

"I don't know, George," Fred said with a smirk. "I don't remember her leaving him with a shoe or anything."

Bill blushed at the Twins' banter, while Charlie just crossed his arms and glared.

"Seriously, Bill? I ought to be going instead of you! She looked to be closer to my age, after all!"

The eldest sibling looked down his nose at his slightly younger brother.

"I'll have you know that Delphini is very mature for an 18-year-old. Far too mature for a kid like you." At that, the 21-year-old Charlie sputtered at the brother barely two years his senior. "Besides," Bill added, "she's not a dragon, so I wouldn't think you'd be interested anyway."

"Prat!" Charlie muttered. "Alright, fine. Just... use Protective Charms, I guess."

"Pfft! You forget who taught you those Charms in the first place!"

With a laugh, Bill headed off in search of the Australian sector, leaving his brothers behind.

"Cheer up, Charlie," Fred said. "Let's go back to the tent."

"Yeah," George added. "And when we get there, maybe you can teach us these *Protective Charms* Bill mentioned. We are both sixteen, after all."

"We reckon it's time we start to explore all those Hogwarts broom closets we keep hearing about."

Charlie lifted his head and looked to the night sky. "Merlin, just kill me now."

The Bulgarian Sector

"So," Ron whispered quietly to Jim, "why did you want to meet Viktor Krum so badly?"

Jim looked at his best mate in surprise. "What do you mean? You were wanting his autograph at the party last Sunday but never got it. I assume because Harry was hanging off him the whole night, and you didn't want to provoke any Black-Potter drama."

Ron crooked an eyebrow. "So this is just so I can get an autograph? Seriously?"

Jim ducked his head. "Yeah, okay. I want his autograph too. And maybe just talk with him for a bit, seeker-to-seeker. I mean, did you see that? *Two Wronski Feints!* The second one *after* he'd gotten a concussion!"

Ron sighed. "Okay, yeah. That was pretty amazing. But do you think he'll even talk to us if he's that badly hurt? He might be unconscious or something."

The Gryffindor Seeker scoffed. "Please! It was just a Bludger to the head!"

"I seem to recall that Harry took a Bludger to the head Second Year and was out until the next morning," Ron replied.

"To be fair," Ginny spoke up from behind them, "that was a *cursed* Bludger. They probably hit harder. Anyway, it wouldn't hurt to see if we can get in to meet him. I didn't get to talk with him at the party either. Mind you-I still say Shannon MacReady would have taken him if Australia had made it to the finals."

"I'll be sure and let him know your opinion, Miss Weasley," said a familiar yet unexpected voice. "He'll be devastated."

The three children and their chaperone turned. It was Draco Malfoy standing next to his father and favoring Jim and the

Weasleys with a smug expression. Lucius seemed mildly surprised to see the group here in Little Bulgaria, but his expression was otherwise aloof.

"Malfoy... s, " Jim spat (with an added S at the end when he noticed Lucius's presence). "What are you doing here?"

"Checking on the health of one of my son's closest friends, Mr. Potter," the elder Malfoy replied. "And what brings *you* here?"

Arthur hesitated in surprise at his former rival's presence, so Ginny stepped forward before Jim and/or Ron got belligerent with either of the Malfoys. The Weasleys had finally gotten past the centuries-long Oath of Enmity between them and the Malfoys. She was in no hurry to see another one put into place. Aside from the social and political consequences from antagonizing the family with whom she unexpectedly shared a secret occult conspiracy, it was just bad manners.

"Besides, " Ginny thought to herself, "Amy's right. Draco has gotten cute. "

None of Ginny's private thoughts about Draco's "cuteness" showed on her face, however, as she addressed the two Malfoys.

"We were hoping to perhaps see Viktor Krum and congratulate him on his performance. His team might not have won, but he's still an incredible Seeker."

Then, she glanced at Ron and Jim out of the corner of her eye and noticed their fuming expressions. She decided to be mischievous.

"I'm sure you learned a great deal from him at Durmstrang," she added with a pointed look at Draco. The boy's mouth

twitched slightly.

"Oh yes, decidedly so!" His eyes cut towards Jim, who he had defeated with his now-legendary Suicide Slam maneuver during their only Seeker confrontation. "I'm an even better Seeker now than I was back at Hogwarts!"

Jim's face darkened, but Arthur spoke up before the Boy-Who-Lived could say anything rude.

"If I might ask, Lucius, has there been any news on Mr. Krum's condition?"

Lucius nodded to Arthur without the slightest hint of hostility. Arthur still found it unnerving. In all the years that they'd known each other, until the Oath of Enmity was resolved, Lucius Malfoy had never once looked at him without sneering.

"We are informed that his injuries have been healed. He is presently getting cleaned up, as there was a significant amount of blood from his Bludger injury. He has instructed his trainers to show us in once he's bathed and had a change of clothes."

"But I'm sure he won't mind if I bring along some of my old schoolmates," Draco said with a smile. "By all means, you're welcome to come in and meet Viktor for a few minutes. Perhaps... get an autograph?"

Jim and Ron both goggled slightly at the magnanimous gesture from someone they'd both hated since their first encounter on the Hogwarts Express.

"Thank you... Malfoy," Jim said with obvious difficulty.
"That's very... kind of you."

"Think nothing of it," the blond boy said with a wave of his hand. Then, he smiled again in a way that only fellow Slytherins would recognize as *dangerous* . "And please... call me *Draco* ."

The Australian Sector

"I'm still curious as to why you wanted to visit the Australians, Daddy," said Hermione as they approached that sector of the campsite.

Dan shrugged. "The ones I met earlier were good people. In fact, some of the wizards brought along squib relatives, and we talked for a bit about what it was like down under, for squibs and Muggleborns both. They invited me to come by and continue discussing it."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Daddy... please tell me you're not thinking of *emigrating* to Australia!"

Her father winced. "Well, certainly not anytime soon! But in a few years, you'll be graduated and... well, I thought it might be a good idea to keep our options open in case living in Wizarding Britain turns out to be less than what you'd hoped for. I mentioned that you were top of your year, and they figured you'd probably have a lot more options down there than up here among the *Purebloods* ." The Muggle spoke the last word with visible disdain.

"It's not that bad, Daddy," Hermione said reprovingly. "Not as bad as, say, Bulgaria or Albania."

Dan snorted. "Yeah, nobody snatched you away when you were a baby and made your Mum and me forget you ever existed! That's a pretty low bar to jump across. Wouldn't you agree, Archie?"

"I would agree that Britain doesn't treat its Squibs or Muggleborns or even its Halfbloods as well as it should compared to Australia," the other man said cautiously. "But things are never going to change if the best Muggleborns give up on the place and flee to another country."

"Like I did," he thought regretfully. While Regulus Black would not have traded his time in Australia with Buck, Matty, and Leo for anything, he remained acutely aware of how much suffering many left behind in Britain endured because he fled in the night rather than fight against the Dark Lord. But his ruminations ended when a familiar voice called out.

"Mr. Granger! Mr. Goodwin!" exclaimed Buck MacMillan as he held a large beer stein aloft. "Welcome to Little Australia! The beer's on me!"

Nearby...

Some distance away from the Grangers, Bill had also made his way into the Australian sector, though he was suddenly and acutely aware of the fact that he'd forgotten to change out of his pro-Ireland jersey. So far, no one had commented on it, though he did draw a few hostile glares. Then, he jumped in surprise as someone behind him called his name.

"Why Mr. Weasley! Whatever brings you to the land of Aussie Quidditch fandom?" asked Delphini White with a saucy grin. Bill Weasley was surprised at how easily the raven-haired girl had snuck up on him.

"Well, I assume you and the rest of the Australian delegation will be departing tomorrow," he answered. "And I wanted to see you again."

She moved closer until the two were less than a foot apart.

"Can you see me now, Bill Weasley?" she asked sweetly as the two peered deeply into each other's eyes.

"I don't know," he said in a husky voice. "There's always room for... closer examination."

As Delphini smiled and leaned in to kiss the eldest Weasley, she tried not to think about the *complicated* nature of the age difference between them. And also the fact that *technically* she was still a married woman.

The Stadium

In a darkened corner of the now-empty stadium, a brown Norwegian rat sat up on its haunches and looked around. Satisfied that no one was near, the rat became a man, and Peter Pettigrew quickly pulled out his wand and Disillusioned himself. Better safe than sorry, after all. But a quick Revelio confirmed his assessment. The World Cup stadium was now completely empty of everyone save two bored-looking DMLE security wizards with the thankless assignment of sitting in the empty stadium all night just on the off chance someone tried to break in and perform any mischief.

Peter checked his watch and then smiled.

"Just a few minutes more, " he thought to himself. "Then we'll see what mischief I can manage. "

4 Privet Drive

There was a burst of fire from the Potters' Floo and an exhausted James Potter stepped through. Since the meeting earlier that afternoon about the Bertha Jorkins case, he'd had to interview everyone close to the missing witch *and then* finish a written report of each interview to be forwarded to Yaxley, which James's boss had *insisted* be finished and sent to him before the ex-Auror could go home for the night.

"As if Director Death Eater is going to look at any of those reports before Monday!" James thought angrily.

As James stepped out into the family's designated "Floo & Magic Stuff Room," Lily was on the far side of the room at her potions station, slowly stirring a small silver cauldron with what appeared to be a bamboo rod while she counted softly under her breath. Before James could speak, Lily gestured towards him with her left hand without looking up from the cauldron, and James was surprised to find himself Silenced. Even more surprising, he had been both *wandlessly and wordlessly* Silenced.

Lily continued stirring and counting. *"340. 341. 342... 343!"* At the same time, she reached with her other hand into a small bowl from which she pulled a single toad's eye that she dropped into the cauldron with a flourish. The potion bubbled furiously for a few seconds and then turned cerulean blue.

"There! Finally!" she exclaimed before turning to James and dispelling the Silencing Charm with a wave of her hand. Then, she moved over to him to kiss his cheek. "Sorry, darling. But I was on the last step, and if I'd lost count, it would have ruined the potion."

James nodded. He'd contacted her after his meeting with Amelia Bones and the others to ask if she knew any potions

or obscure Charms that might be useful to the Jorkins investigation. All he had to go on was that the witch had been kidnapped sometime after August 7th, but with the Cup Final going on, there were no DMLE forensic wizards to help him. Luckily, he had a brilliant wife who by rights should have a Potions Mastery by now. To his sudden embarrassment, he belatedly realized how inattentive he'd been when Lily had been pursuing Muggle higher education during the earlier years of their marriage. However, he'd been quite certain it was something to do with biological sciences. And to his delight, she said she knew a potion that might help. A very demanding potion, apparently.

"Wow. That potion must be a beast if you're still at it after over ten hours. Did I just hear you say you had to stir it 343 times?"

Lily barked out a laugh while rubbing her stirring hand to get the kinks out of it. "Oh darling, you have no idea. I had to stir it clockwise 343 times. And then drop in a single dandelion petal and stir *anticlockwise* 343 times. Followed by another petal and another round of stirring until I'd infused *seven* petals before I could add the toad's eye! I thought my arm was going to fall off!"

She stuck her hand out. "Now then-the spoon, please. I hope you were able to get it and keep it uncontaminated. The potion is only good for another half-hour."

James nodded at her request and then reached into a pocket to produce a black silken bag of the sort that Aurors used for evidence collection. Technically, he was no longer authorized to use such items, but no one was manning the Office of Forensic Magic today, and it seemed his clearance to get inside had never been revoked. Consequently, he had decided to display initiative and beg forgiveness later. He

reached inside the bag and pulled out a soup spoon still marked with moldy, rancid food stains, the same spoon that he'd taken from the floor next to Bertha Jorkins' kitchen table. According to his deductions, she'd been eating when her abductors arrived, but he didn't know when.

"Right. Here you go. By the way, I'd be a fool to ever underestimate your skill and all, but when the heck did you learn how to cast wandlessly and wordlessly?"

Lily gave him a pained expression. "You may recall that a few months ago, a certain betraying rat-Animagus captured me, disarmed me, and tied me up as his prisoner. Like I was a damsel from an old Muggle serial waiting to be tied to the railroad tracks. After that, I decided it would be a good idea to put some effort into wandless casting. I can only do the Silencing Charm and a fairly weak Finite, but that might have been enough to turn the tables against Peter if I'd been able to do it last Spring."

James grinned. "Have I mentioned lately how amazing you are?"

"Not *lately*," she answered lightly while taking the spoon from his hand. "But if you think that's amazing, wait until you see my potion in action."

With that, she returned to the cauldron and dipped the spoon inside. After stirring it yet another seven times (anticlockwise), she pulled out a spoonful of a dark purple liquid the consistency of ink which she then drizzled slowly onto a parchment. The purple ink began to move of its own accord before forming into a number-a very large number-in Lily's handwriting: 2,527,317.

James blinked. "Soooo, what does that tell us?"

Lily picked up a quill and began performing some quick calculations. "The potion assesses the rate at which certain biological materials break down when removed from the body-in this case, the residual saliva left on the spoon. You said you thought that whoever kidnapped Bertha Jorkins interrupted her mealtime to do so. Well, according to this potion, I can tell you definitively that the last time this spoon was in someone's mouth was 2,527,317 seconds ago. Well, counting back from the time the potion touched the spoon, I suppose, so that's a minute off give or take. But it should be fairly close."

"That's brilliant!" James exclaimed. "And you came up with this while working on your..." He paused in embarrassment. "... your bio-something degree?"

She smiled. "Biochemistry. And yes, I did." Then, she turned her face from James as certain memories came to mind. "I developed it as part of a larger project that studied how... how the human body interacts with potions and other magical substances after they've been ingested."

Then, Lily coughed to clear her throat (and to push unpleasant memories aside). "Okay, according to my maths, the last time this spoon was used for eating purposes was sometime around noon on July 30th. So that must be when she was taken."

James frowned and shook his head. "No, sorry love, but... that can't be right. Bertha was seen at the World Cup campground a week after that on August 7th. She was there overseeing the installation of the section markers."

"Well, I didn't stir this potion, 2,401 times to get it wrong, James," the witch said somewhat testily. "I'm positive it worked correctly. Perhaps when Bertha showed up on the

7th, she was Imperiused or even someone else under Polyjuice."

James looked doubtful, and even Lily wondered what the point of such a deception might be. "What is a section marker, anyway?"

"They're guidestones, basically," James said distractedly. "They demarcate the boundaries between the different sections of the campgrounds that have been set aside for different visiting nations. They also act sort of like homing beacons so that people who portkey into the campsite are automatically shunted to the right place."

The husband and wife looked at one another as they both considered the significance of Bertha Jorkins' last public appearance. And almost simultaneously, their eyes widened in horror.

"Oh Bloody Hell!" James said with a gasp. Lily turned and ran.

"I'll get my purse!" she yelled as she bolted out of the room.

James was briefly flummoxed by her response, as he suddenly felt time might be of the essence. Then, he realized. She meant *that* purse. The one she'd enchanted after her parents died and that she carried seemingly everywhere during the last years of the War.

Lily Evans Potter's Infamous Battle Purse.

The Irish Sector

It had been hours since Ireland's victory, and the parties in the Irish sector were still going strong. But to Marcus Flint's

relief, other than a few fireworks-related mishaps and some rogue leprechauns running amok, things were relatively restrained. It had been an exhausting couple of weeks on this assignment, and he still a loose tooth that needed to be looked at from where he'd taken a brick to the face during the riots after the Australia-Ireland match a few days before. Emily Rossum, who was both his girlfriend and technically his superior officer, walked beside him, and, between rousting overly belligerent drunks, they discussed their plans for a vacation together a few weeks after the Cup was finally over and all these people were *gone* .

"I hear Magical Majorca is nice," Marcus thought to himself.

Then, his attention was distracted by an odd sound coming from somewhere nearby. He glanced around and saw the source of the disturbance. It was a large rock with a rune sequence carved into it. Having avoided the Ancient Runes class like the plague, Marcus had no idea what the runes signified, though he knew that they were all over the campsite serving as boundary markers between the different sections. He'd seen them around since the first day of Cup competition, but until now, he'd never known one to hum loudly before. Or to start glowing brightly.

Acting on instinct, Marcus shoved Emily to the ground and covered her body with his own just seconds before a bolt of magical energy shot up from the stone. All around the campsite, similar bolts erupted from each of the dozens of guidestones that "Bertha Jorkins" had placed weeks earlier, guidestones that had some very special and highly illegal properties that were just waiting to be unleashed. The magical bolts bent in the air and stretched and twisted until they crossed paths high above the campsite area forming a glowing lattice that lit up the night sky. Then, there was a

brilliant flash of light that blinded Marcus for a few seconds. He blinked to clear his vision and then gasped.

Nearby, there were about two dozen new figures who had no business being here in the Irish Sector. They were all wearing the distinctive green and yellow of the Australian fans, but these outfits also came with hoods and masks to conceal their faces. A few of them carried wands and immediately began casting destructive spells seemingly without a care for who they were targeting. But to the young Aurors' surprise, most of them carried very different weapons. Marcus Flint may never have taken Muggle Studies, but Emily Rossum had, and in the NEWTs classes, Lily Potter had been surprisingly thorough on what automatic weapons were and how effectively they could pierce all but the strongest shields.

"PROTEGO MAXIMUS!" The junior Auror just barely got her shield up in time to block the hail of bullets that rained down upon the prone pair. The nearby Irish fans weren't so lucky, particularly after one of the Australian attackers pulled out a green egg-shaped object, yanked a pin out of the top, and hurled it as far as he could. Seconds later, there was an explosion as loud as any Bombarda.

And then, the screaming started in earnest.

The BMW Tent

Harry had only just fallen asleep when he was awoken by the sound of Sirius shouting his name.

"Get up! Harry! Neville! Come on now, get up! This is urgent!"

"S'matter?" Neville said.

Instantly, Harry could tell that something was wrong. He opened up his Legilimency sense and could tell that the noises of the campsite had changed from festive party sounds to screams of terror punctuated by explosions and the sound of... *gunfire*?! Who would bring guns to a wizarding event? With a gesture, his wand leaped into his hand, and with a flick he summoned his clothes from where he'd left them. But Sirius called out again to stop him.

"No time, Harry!" the older wizard said while struggling to pull his jeans on over his pajamas. "Just put your shoes on, grab your jacket, and get outside! Now!"

Sirius turned to the other two boys in the tent. "Neville, send a Patronus to Archie! Tell him to grab the Grangers and meet us at the car park next to Dan's vehicle. Theo, send one to Lucius and tell him to get Draco and Apparate out of here! I'll go wake Amy."

Seconds later, Sirius and the four groggy children had exited the tent to find pandemonium waiting. People were running in every direction, screaming in panic. From one direction, Harry could still hear gunfire. But coming from other directions, he could hear explosions and spellfire as well. Most worrying of all were the occasional flashes of green light that could be seen not far from their position. Harry was aware of only one spell with *that* shade of green: the Killing Curse. Nearby, he saw wizards and witches in Auror and DMLE uniforms rushing to and fro, but with the attacks coming from all sides, there was no one to organize a counterattack. Most disturbing of all was the night sky, which was illuminated by a *web* of crisscrossing lines of magical energy.

"Shouldn't we try to help the Ministry?" Neville asked. Sirius hesitated, his inner Gryffindor warring with his duties as

godfather.

"No. You lot are underage. And-*incredibly* -I'm the only responsible adult handy. Plus, I don't even want to *think* about what your grandmother will do to me if anything happens to you, Neville. So I'm getting you lot to safety. Got it?"

Harry clutched his wand tighter. He had his own inner Gryffindor as well, as much as he hated to admit it. But even if it weren't insane for him to rush heedlessly into battle against unknown forces, he also had to consider his friends. If he went out to fight, Neville and Theo would insist on joining him, to say nothing of Sirius (who was not physically ready for such exertions). And then, no one would be left to look after Amy.

"Got it," Harry said firmly.

"Good. All of you keep your wands out, and if anyone looks like they're threatening you, blast 'em and ask questions later. Now come on."

With that, Sirius (who could neither Apparate nor use a Portkey at the moment) led the way with his four young charges following closely behind.

Tiberius Nott's tent

The Death Eater stiffened in his chair at the sound of explosions in the distance. That was the signal he'd been waiting for. Instantly, Nott moved to the "empty" cage on the far side of his tent and unlocked it.

"You have the scent, my beauties," he growled cruelly. "Go! Go now and hunt them down!"

With that, the two invisible Barghests bounded out of the tent. Tiberius Nott paused just long enough to throw an invisibility cloak over himself and grab the enchanted crossbow off a nearby table before running in pursuit of his hellhounds.

The Stadium

Peter watched from the shadows as the sounds of explosions and gunfire echoed in the distance. After a brief argument over exactly what their duties were in such a situation-and more importantly, *what the hell* was happening up in the sky-the two security guards ran off to assist the Ministry. Peter exhaled. He was not averse to killing the two guards if they remained in his way, but this mission called for subtlety, and the wizards assigned to guard the Goblet of Fire showing up dead was the exact opposite of subtle. He waited a few seconds to make sure they were gone, and then he turned on his heels and apparated to just outside the wards defending the fabled Goblet. The web created by the enchanted guidestones would also serve as anti-Apparation and anti-Portkey jinxes, but like the Dark Mark, those wards were specifically designed to let certain people pass through them without difficulty. The poor saps out in the campsite providing Peter's diversion wore magical uniforms provided by House Selwyn to allow them to come and go, even the Muggles who'd been Imperiused into fighting on their behalf. Indeed, while a Muggle couldn't normally use a Portkey, happily, one placed under the Imperius by a wizard could overcome that hurdle. But all Peter needed to bypass the wards was the snake tattoo on his left arm.

Upon materializing near the Goblet, Peter reached into his pocket and produced two items: a glass vial and a Muggle squeaky toy in the shape of a mouse, the sort of thing one

might buy as a present for a cat. The rat Animagus assumed it was Mr. January being passive-aggressive and ignored the implied insult. Pulling the stopper from the vial, Peter downed the contents in one gulp and then shuddered as he felt his magic change to resonate with that of the woman who'd given her life for the Cause. Granted, it hadn't been a voluntary sacrifice, but Peter would never hold that against poor Bertha Jorkins.

Without another thought, Peter stepped through the protective wards without issue before snatching the wooden goblet off its perch. Then, he held the Muggle toy aloft. "Devil's Tor," he said, and in a flash, the Portkey carried both him and his prize away.

The Australian Sector

For the last twenty minutes, Buck MacMillan had been happily answering all of Dan Granger's questions about life in Magical Australia, including (to Regulus's bemusement and Hermione's mortification) the state of wizarding dentistry in that nation. The group had taken up a picnic table in the center of Little Australia to have a few beers and a fizzy drink for Hermione; as it was a special occasion, Dan made allowances for his daughter defiling her teeth with the soft drink. Then, it all went to hell with a flash of light from somewhere deeper in the Australian Sector that shot up into the night sky and joined other similar lights to form a strange magical lattice. Seconds later, the disturbance in the skies was overshadowed by the sounds of multiple Portkeys, followed by cries of "**INCENDIO**" and then screams. And while most of those screams were instinct, Regulus Black could easily make out one word out of all the rest.

"WEREWOLVES!"

Instantly, the Metamorphmagus leaped up from the table and drew his wand.

"Take your daughter and get back to the BMW tent, Dan," Archie growled. "I'll be along shortly."

"How about *you* take Dan *and* his daughter back instead, *Archie* !" snapped Buck. "Rather than letting a Squib-no offense-and his underage Muggleborn daughter go alone by foot while there might be werewolves about! You *can* Apparate them instantly, right?"

Archie's face was such a mask of fury that, for the first time in ages, Regulus was at risk of losing control of his own appearance. Finally, he relented, stowed his wand, and grabbed both Dan and Hermione by their arms. Nothing happened.

"Dammit!" he exclaimed. "We're under an anti-Apparation ward! I reckon we'll have to go by foot!"

"But where should we go?!" Hermione shouted. "Those lights came from all over the campsite! Is our tent even safe?"

That question was answered by the sudden and startling appearance of a huge spectral bear that spoke with the voice of Neville Longbottom and announced Sirius's intention to regroup at the car park.

"You heard the man, Archie! Now go!" With that, Buck whistled loudly. Instantly, Reggie, his thylacine familiar, darted out of a nearby tent to join him. He turned and, after a brief hesitation, pulled the other wizard into a bear hug.

"Go, son," he whispered. "And *try* not to use your Patronus where anyone can see it. It's... kinda distinctive."

Then, he let go and began jogging in the direction of the fight. Archie watched him go and then turned to Hermione and Dan.

"Let's go," he said tersely. The three quickly departed.

None of them noticed two figures wearing the uniforms of British Aurors heading in the opposite direction... deeper into Little Australia in the direction of Alexander McAvity's tent.

The Devil's Tor

Barely a second after departing the stadium, Peter materialized at his target destination: the Devil's Tor, a granite outcropping rising out of the earth, still in Dartmoor but well over 100 miles away from the World Cup site. Waiting for him were Miss Direction and Mr. January, both standing too close together as far as Mr. Norvegicus was concerned. He shook his head to clear it. Jealousy over Narcissa was always a fool's fancy, and tonight, he had more important things to worry about. He handed off both the Goblet of Fire and his wand to January. Then, he took a step back and shifted to his rat form. And while he was perfectly capable of transforming his clothes as well as his body, he was equally capable of leaving them behind, and the time he had for this ritual was too short to waste it stripping the normal way. A few seconds later, the brown Norwegian rat scampered out of the pile of clothing that had just dropped to the ground before resuming his now-naked human form, albeit a naked human form *covered* in runes painted earlier

onto his bare flesh with a mixture of henna, pomegranate juice, and the blood of the innocent.

"I do hope you don't catch a cold, Norvegicus," January said with a sneer.

Peter said nothing. He had barely half an hour to do what needed to be done, and so trading quips with a rival Death Eater would have to wait. He reclaimed both his wand and the Goblet before climbing up to the top of the Tor. His ritual space had already been prepared. The flat surface of the tor had been carefully inscribed with chalk runes from languages long dead before the birth of the Roman Empire. In the center sat a small black cauldron already bubbling away and a box containing the other ritual components. He placed the Goblet in a spot on the other side of the cauldron before sitting down cross-legged. He closed his eyes and opened his Animagus senses to the ambient magic of the Devil's Tor. The ambient *Wild* magic of the Devil's Tor.

After a few moments, he opened his eyes and began to speak.

"Let Magic hear me," he said in an unnaturally resonant voice that seemed to echo through the night. "Let Magic hear me and *obey* as it did in the Time Before. Let the Wild Magic of Old hear me and be bound to my will. As I will it, *so mote it be*."

As he spoke, he waved his wand in a seemingly random pattern towards the general direction of the Goblet. At the base of the tor, Narcissa shivered at the sensation of something unnatural floating at the edge of her awareness. Something cold. Peter's voice rose once more.

"I speak in the name of my Master, He Who Must Not Be Named, and I invoke the Ritual of the Three-Faced

Psychopomp as was written in the Time Before by the Priest-Kings of Lost Kemet. The Ritual of the Servant, the Father, and the Enemy. And I claim this artifact of ancient magic as the instrument of my will and my master's urge to live once more. So mote it be."

At that, the Goblet of Fire began to vibrate and then loudly rattle, as if it were trying to fight off Pettigrew's attempt to enslave it to his magic. The wizard's jaw clenched painfully at his mental exertions, and after a few seconds, rivulets of blood began to drip from his tear ducts. But after several minutes, the vibrations suddenly stopped. Pettigrew smiled before bracing himself for what came next. The hard part was over. What came next was just the *painful* part. He reached into the box and pulled out a ceremonial dagger enchanted to unnatural sharpness.

"I offer as tribute the flesh of the servant freely given to revive the master. And I name myself like so. I am the last son of the House of Kleinwuchs and the one true Heir of Emeric the Evil." As Peter spoke, his skin rippled slightly and then bulged obscenely. "I am the King of Rats. I am the Master of Werewolves. I am the Proud Betrayer Who Walks Unseen. I am Mr. Norvegicus and I am Wormtail. So mote it be!"

Then, with a choked cry of pain, Pettigrew sliced off the pinky finger of his left hand and tossed it into the bowl in front of him. The potion inside burbled loudly for several seconds as if digesting the bloody digit. Peter bit down on the pain and tried to ignore the blood pouring from the wound. He could not heal it until the ritual was done, and so he would need to move quickly to complete things before blood loss made him incapable of doing so. With his good hand, he reached back into the box and pulled out a skull,

which he placed on the ground between himself and the bowl.

"I offer as tribute the bone of the father unknowingly given to revive the son. And I name the father like so."

As Peter continued the ritual, the rippling of his skin intensified, as if there were small creatures crawling madly beneath his skin waiting to burst free. Down below at the base of the tor, Mr. January and Miss Direction watched the ritual impassively and tried to ignore the terrible discordant hum coming from all around them and the crushing sensation of drowning in magic forbidden since long before Merlin.

One mile outside the campsite grounds

A flash of light and a loud crack heralded the arrival of James and Lily Potter. Unfortunately, their arrival was both off-target and painful, as the two landed in a heap on the grass far short of James's intended target. Both of them moaned in pain for a few seconds before James could finally pull himself up and check on his wife.

"Lil-lily-flower?" he asked weakly. "R'you okay?"

"Ohh!" she said with a moan. "I feel like I got run over by a Nundu. What happened?"

James looked over Lily's body and his own to check for any missing pieces. Thankfully, there were none. He looked back in the direction of the stadium and noticed the lattice of magical energy rising up over it.

"I... I think there must be an anti-Apparation jinx up over the campsite. I've never seen one like that before. We bounced

off of it. It's a bloody miracle we didn't splinch."

Lily frowned at that and pulled herself up into a sitting position. Then, she put her right hand over her purse and made a sequence of gestures. James remembered seeing her activate the purse that way back during the last war. He'd never bothered to ask her what the gestures actually meant and just assumed they were some hand-based runic thing. It was, in fact, British Sign Language, and in response to her silent commands, several potions shot up out of the bag into her waiting grasp.

"Pepper-Up. And something to counteract the system shock from a failed Apparation. Drink that one first."

James complied, and within seconds they were both recovered from the trauma of hitting the strange ward. Now that they were on the ground, he could see the shimmer of the ward's outer edge.

"I should have thought to grab a broom before we left," he grumbled aloud. But then, in the distance, they could see several people on broomsticks rising up over the campsite, apparently attempting to flee. The flyers got to the edge of the barrier only to impact against it. There was another flash of light, and the riders fell, most likely from a fatal height.

"Then again, perhaps it's best I didn't," he added. Meanwhile, Lily had made her way to the edge of the barrier and cast several analytic Charms.

"Any ideas how we can get through it?" James asked. The witch shook her head.

"No, but we may not have to. The barrier is incredibly resilient, but I don't think it extends underground."

"Say no more," James said as he knelt to the ground and touched his wand to it. There was a rumbling sound and within seconds, a tunnel had opened up in the earth that led past the boundary to a second opening on the other side. His Transfiguration even fashioned actual steps leading down into the tunnel, which looked more like it was made from cement blocks than soil. Swiftly, he ran down the tunnel with Lily close behind.

Once on the other side, James turned to his wife.

"We still can't Apparate in here. But I can move faster than you can. Stay here while I go find Jim..."

"Not a chance, Buster," she interrupted. "You may be faster than me, but I *do* know how to ride."

James snorted. "You know, if this weren't some kind of terrorist attack that our son was mixed up in, I think I'd find that comment quite sexy."

And then James was gone, and Prongs stood in his place.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, husband," she said with just a hint of a smirk while pulling herself up onto the stag's back. And then, they were off.

The Bulgarian Sector

While Jim and Ron had finally gotten to meet Viktor Krum, both boys had been slightly embarrassed by the look of annoyance their idol had given them when they asked for autographs, which he grudgingly provided. In retrospect, it probably was a bit crass to ask for autographs from someone lying in a hospital bed still groggy from a concussion. Of course, it didn't help that *Draco Malfoy* was acting as their

interpreter as Krum apparently spoke little to no English. And *who knew* what Malfoy was telling Krum about them in... *Russian* ?

Meanwhile, Arthur and Lucius stood off to one side commiserating with the Bulgarian coach, Dimitar Stoichkov. While the man was hardly fluent in English, he was doing better than Krum, and the three wizards talked for several minutes about the disappointing Final match, about Krum's injuries, and about the boy's career plans. Stoichkov was also apparently aware of Lucius Malfoy's stature; when the wealthy wizard expressed interest in acquiring a professional Quidditch team, the Bulgarian immediately inquired as to whether he had a new coach in mind.

Their discussions were abruptly interrupted by the sounds of nearby explosions followed by screams. Lucius and Arthur were the first out the tent door, though Jim was right behind them. Indeed, Arthur quickly grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him back even as he stared aghast at the scene. Fires were quickly spreading across the entire Bulgarian sector, and the curses were flying. And the source of the disturbance could clearly be seen in the distance: dozens of masked and robed men attacking everyone in their path. Masks and robes that both Arthur and Lucius recognized.

"Death Eaters!" Arthur gasped. Then, despite himself, he glanced to the man next to him, the one who'd been a Marked Death Eater in his younger days. Lucius said nothing in response to the questioning look, though he did pull his wand from the end of his walking stick before casting several silent spells. To the surprise of both men, it was Jim Potter who spoke up.

"No, Mr. Weasley! Those aren't real Death Eaters. Those uniforms are fake. Just like with the two that attacked me

and stole my wand!"

"Are you sure, Jim?" Arthur asked.

"They're wearing Muggle shoes under their robes! I can see them from here!"

Lucius looked down at the Potter boy in surprise. "Can you, Mr. Potter? From this distance?"

Jim gulped. "*Yeah,* " he thought. "*But only because I've got a bird's superior vision.* "

Malfoy didn't press the issue. Instead, he simply cast the Supersensory Charm on himself.

"Hmm, yes. I see it now. Still, these ersatz Death Eaters are no less dangerous for their imitation of the original. They have cast anti-Apparition and anti-Portkey wards."

Then, everyone was distracted by a sudden flash of silvery light from inside the tent. It was Fiver, Theo No-Name's rabbit Patronus.

"Mr. Malfoy," it said in Theo's voice. "The campsite is under some kind of attack. Sirius Black asked me to warn you and recommend that you and Draco Apparate to safety at once." Then, the Patronus faded from view.

"A sensible suggestion," Lucius said aloud. "Do you concur, Arthur?"

"I thought you said there was an anti-Apparition jinx up," Ron said.

"Yes, but one which I believe I can circumvent with relative ease."

"We can't just run away!" Jim exclaimed, who was still looking out the tent's entryway anxiously. "Whether they're Death Eaters or not, the Ministry will need help!"

Then, an unexpected voice gave Jim support.

"Potter boy speaks truth!" Viktor Krum said somewhat groggily as he tried to rise from his sickbed. "Are we not Bogatyrs?!"

Unfortunately for Krum's enthusiasm, his legs gave way almost immediately, and Draco and Ginny barely caught the Bulgarian Seeker before he fell to the ground.

"*You* are a heavily concussed Bogatyr, Viktor," he said as he practically shoved the other boy back into bed. "And you're staying where you are."

Suddenly, the sound of additional spellfire could be heard, but these spells were shouted in Bulgarian.

"Ah, capital!" Lucius said with a grim smile, as the Bulgarian Aurors sent as security for the team charged the advancing faux Death Eaters. "It seems the visiting Aurors are on hand to deal with these charlatans. Still, perhaps Black has the right idea, and discretion is the better part of valor."

"You're just going to Apparate away?" Jim shouted.

"No, Mr. Potter," Lucius said languidly even as he gestured with his wand. In response, a rope that had been strung across to poles to support a set of fairy lights detached itself and flew to his hand. "I'm going to make a Portkey so that we can evacuate as many people as possible. Arthur, I assume you and your children will be accompanying us? I'll be setting it for St. Mungo's, as Mr. Krum clearly needs additional attention."

Arthur hesitated. "Thank you for taking the children. But... I have four other children here, Lucius. I've got to find them."

Lucius stared somewhat balefully at his old rival before finally giving a longsuffering sigh. He stepped across the tent to place the rope on a table and began a series of complicated wand movements. "**PORTUS.**" Then, he turned back to Arthur.

"I will use the Portkey to send the children and Mr. Krum to safety and then accompany you to find your other children. *But* as soon as we have done so, we will all leave immediately. Agreed?"

Everyone was amazed at Lucius's words, but Arthur nodded gratefully. But then, Draco spoke up.

"Um, Father? I hate to further complicate our situation, but where's Potter gotten off to?"

They all looked back to the tent flap, and Jim was gone.

"I'll strangle him," Ron said through gritted teeth.

The Irish Sector

While Emily tried desperately to maintain her Protego Maxima against the gunfire from the Australian attackers, Marcus concentrated on remembering the details of a story he'd heard many months before from Blaise Zabini. A story about how Hermione Granger had saved the boy's life back in Italy in the summer of 1993. Flint pointed his wand towards the gunmen.

"**MERGIT FLAMMARUM!**"

To his relief, the Fire Suppression Charm worked just as Blaise had said, and instantly, the guns went silent. Seizing her chance, Emily dropped her shield and fired a Blasting Curse right into the middle of the gunmen.

"BOMBARDA! "

The Australians were blasted off their feet. The two young Aurors jumped up and moved for cover, firing curses as they went. Luckily, most of the attackers seemed stunned and sluggish, and the pair's Stunners took them down effectively. But then...

"EXPULSO! "

Emily shoved Marcus as hard as she could out of the way, but the impact of the blast caught them both and knocked them to the ground a good twenty feet away. Marcus coughed and shook his head to clear it. Blood dripped into his eyes from a gash on his forehead. Then, he screamed Emily's name and crawled over to check on her, heedless of his own safety. To his relief, she was alive, though unconscious. Then, he came to his senses, remembered he was in the middle of a battle, and started looking for his wand. It had landed several feet away, but before he could move towards it, a shadow fell over him. It was the Australian who'd fired the Expulso... and who now had a wand pointed right at Marcus's head.

"CRUCI-! "

"AVADA KEDAVRA! "

A flash of green light struck the masked Australian in the back, and he dropped without a sound. Flint turned towards the source of the Killing Curse, and to his surprise, it was a

different masked Australian, one who still had his wand raised as if ready to fire. Except...

Except that this man was not an Australian. The voice that had cried out the Killing Curse had not carried an Australian accent. More importantly, the voice was one that the young man knew quite well. Marcus looked up into the masked face of his savior, and after what seemed like an eternity, he finally gasped out a single word.

"Da?"

The other man (who was almost certainly Aries Flint beneath his mask) did not respond. He simply turned and fled into the night.

The Bulgarian Sector

A few seconds earlier...

While Lucius Malfoy was busy enchanting a Portkey so that everyone could escape, Jim stayed near the entrance to the tent to keep an eye out in case any of the attackers made it past the Bulgarian Aurors to get close enough to be a threat. While the boy's "inner Gryffindor" cried out against running away, he'd promised himself after losing his ash and phoenix feather wand to fight smarter and, in his own words "to stop making stupid mistakes." Malfoy was right (as much as it pained him to admit it). He had no business trying to fight Death Eaters. Or whatever these attackers were if not true Death Eaters.

But just as he was about to step closer to the table to join the others in using the Portkey, his attention was suddenly drawn to an explosion from somewhere nearby but on the opposite side of the Bulgarian sector from where the Aurors

were converging. He poked his head out of the tent to see what had happened and saw that about fifty yards down the path, several tents had caught fire. Without him even thinking about it, his raven-sight homed in on the disturbance.

"I still have no idea how I can change my vision to better than 20-20 without my glasses screwing it up," he thought. *"Animagery is weird."*

Then, he gasped. There was a second phalanx of ten or so Death Eaters, targeting everything on that side of the camp with incendiary and explosive curses, a group that would soon catch the Aurors in a crossfire. And to Jim's horror, he saw a man in Bulgarian clothes running desperately with a young girl no more than five or six clutched in his arms, only to be cut down from behind by some curse. The man fell to the ground, and the child cried out in pain and terror. Jim opened his mouth to call out to Mr. Weasley, but before he could draw breath, his eerie vision focused on the prone man, and Jim somehow *knew* even from this distance that he was already dead. Just as he *knew* that, within seconds, the girl would be dead as well-dead at the wand of the killer in Death Eater robes who was striding towards her out of the smoke and flames.

Unless Jim acted.

And just like that, reason fled the boy, and *raw animal instinct* took over. Before he even understood what had happened, the raven Animagus was already airborne and halfway to the girl. Against the night sky, the corvid was practically invisible, and as the Death Eater raised his wand to target the distraught child, he never knew what hit him. When the raven was just a few feet away, it let out a threatening caw and extended its talons towards the killer's

face, but it was a fourteen-year-old boy who materialized seemingly out of thin air to kick him in the head with both legs. The Death Eater was knocked onto his back, even as Jim landed gracefully in a crouch while simultaneously pulling out his acacia wand.

"**STUPEFY!**" he cried out. The Death Eater swooned but didn't fall, and Jim cursed the wand in his hand, one which was obviously not meant for dueling. A second Stunner was no more effective than the first, and the Death Eater raised his own wand to fire. Behind Jim, the little girl was still crying. Jim hesitated... and cast once more.

"**SSSTUPEFY!**" he hissed, and the Parselmagic-enhanced spell struck the Death Eater in the chest hard enough to send him flying through the air to land in an unconscious heap. Unfortunately, his defeat only alerted the other Death Eaters who turned in Jim's direction. Worse, at the same time, Jim let out a cry of pain and dropped his replacement wand, the shattered remnants of which fell to the ground in pieces even as he clutched his injured hand. As the Death Eaters advanced, Jim snatched up the terrified little girl and ran towards a nearby alleyway, dodging spellfire as he went.

"*Typical,*" he thought grimly as he ran. "*That's two wands lost in less than a week. Must be a new world record.*"

Then, one of the curses flew over the boy's head to strike a large tent pole just ahead of him. It exploded and fell, blocking Jim's path and catching fire for good measure. The boy cursed angrily. He could escape easily as a raven, but that would mean abandoning the little girl to her fate. The approaching Death Eaters came to a halt not twenty feet away and raised their wands towards the two. Jim pushed the little girl to the ground and covered her body with his own as the Death Eaters opened fire.

"PROTEGO! "

Instantly, a glimmering shield appeared to deflect the hail of curses. Jim lifted his head, and his eyes widened in amazement, as a magnificent stag leaped through the flames and over the two children, with his mother riding it like some Celtic goddess of old. Lily jumped off of the animal's back, and Prongs continued his charge, impaling two Death Eaters on his antlers and then sending them flying with a mighty flick of his head.

Lily ran back to check on Jim. Seeing that he was safe, she turned back towards the Death Eaters while making a complex hand gesture over the large purse she carried slung over her shoulder. To Jim's surprise, three Golden Snitches jumped up into her waiting hand. She held them up to her mouth.

"Target Death Eaters!" she practically snarled before hurling the Snitches towards them. At their apogee, the Snitches' wings sprouted, and they each flew unerringly towards one of the attackers, somehow homing in on their distinctive masks. On impact, each of the Snitches stuck fast to the mask as if magnetized. Then, those three Death Eaters screamed as the Snitches lit up their bodies with a powerful electrical charge. They all dropped to the ground.

Meanwhile, Prongs whirled around and chambered his rear legs before kicking another Death Eater in the chest so hard the man was flung back twenty feet, knocking two of his compatriots down at the same time. In a flash, Prongs was replaced by James Potter, and the ex-Auror whirled around and dropped to touch his wand to the ground. In response, thick vines shot up out of the ground to tightly wrap around the remaining attackers and immobilize them. Several quick Stunners later, the last of the Death Eaters were

unconscious, and James and Lily turned their attention to their son, who looked up at them in a mixture of awe and trepidation.

"Okay, before you yell at me for wandering into danger," he said shakily while helping the traumatized little girl to her feet. "Can we take care of her? Her father... I saw him get killed earlier. I don't know if she has any other family here." Then, despite himself, Jim gave a soft snuffle. "And maybe... you could give me a hug?"

James and Lily looked at one another and then decided to start with the hug.

The British Sector

Initially, Charlie Weasley had insisted that he and the Twins remain at the Weasley tent until their father came back, but that resolve was broken when the explosions began. After confirming that Apparition was blocked, he led Fred and George out into the campgrounds and headed towards the entrance, hoping that he would be able to spirit his brothers away if they could make it outside the strange barrier that lit up the night sky. They picked up some stragglers en route: the Greengrass sisters, Tracey Davis, Hannah Abbott, and Hannah's nine-year-old brother Ben. According to Daphne, she'd been instructed to lead the other children to safety in the woods while the adult wizards in their group "went to help the Ministry."

Unfortunately, the journey to the woods soon led them into danger, as they crossed paths with a group of Death Eaters who were setting fire to several tents. From the screams, there were obviously still people inside. To Charlie's surprise, the Twins were the first to step forward and begin hurling

Stunners in the direction of the attackers, very good Stunners for boys who'd only just finished their OWLs. He'd known that Fred and George had been getting summer tutoring paid for by Harry Black, but he'd not known it was so *Defense-oriented*. The Death Eaters took cover and began to return fire, and Charlie quickly hustled the younger kids behind a hastily constructed barricade. Then, Hannah cried out.

"That's the Diggorys' tent! They're still inside!"

Charlie cursed and turned to his younger brothers. "Keep the Death Eaters pinned down! I'm going to go do something stupid!"

With that, Charlie ran towards the burning tent while Fred and George started firing stronger hexes towards the Death Eaters. Behind them, the four girls took shelter. Hannah tried to console her terrified little brother, while Tracey and Astoria merely wept in mounting panic. Only Daphne stared after Charlie in confusion.

"*What Death Eaters?! " she thought to herself furiously.
"Those are bloody Australians! You can tell by their colors! "*

None of them noticed as one of the attackers reached down to twist a ring on his finger before disappearing from view.

Seconds later, Charlie had made his way to the Diggorys' tent. He'd ducked most of the curses sent his way, and luckily, the only one to hit was an *Inflamare*. By this point in his career as a dragon keeper, Charlie Weasley was all but immune to that spell. He ducked around the tent to find that the side of it was already engulfed in flames. Despite the severity of the situation, the dragon keeper smiled. By now he could cast *Extinguishing Charms* almost wandlessly. With just a wave of his wand, all the flames on the tent went out.

Then, he cast a Cutting Curse to tear open the burnt canvas to provide an escape route only for his eyes to widen as a terrified voice cried out from inside in obvious panic.

"DIFFINDO MAXIMUS! "

Charlie Weasley screamed.

Back at the Devil's Tor...

Peter gritted his teeth in concentration even as his eyes swam from blood loss. With his good hand, he reached back into the box to remove three items: a wand (ash and phoenix feather), a golden ring, and a glass container containing a bloody handkerchief. He opened the container first and tossed the handkerchief into the cauldron.

"I offer as tribute the blood of the enemy forcibly taken. You will resurrect your foe. And I name the enemy like so." Peter picked up the golden ring, the long-missing Potter Heir's ring which he'd stolen from Godric's Hollow on the night Voldemort was vanquished, and he tossed it into the cauldron as well. Then, he held up Jim Potter's stolen wand and thrust it up into the night sky.

"He is the Heir of the House of Potter. He is the Enemy Foretold. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord. Born of those who have thrice defied him. Born as the seventh month dieeeee-YEARGH!"

Pettigrew's incantation was interrupted by a scream of agony as he bent his head to one side. From the exposed side of his neck, the skin stretched and pulled as if it were thin rubber... and the shape of a rat's head and upper body suddenly appeared, as if such a rodent were trying to literally chew its way out of the Death Eater's neck.

"He... AARGH... HE is... the Basilisk Slayer! His touch brings death to the Dark Lord's servants! He speaks the Sacred Tongue of Salazar Slytherin! He is the Chosen One! He is... *THE BOY-WHO-LIVED! SO MOTE IT BE!* "

On the ground in front of Peter, a pool of blood had collected from the stump where his finger had been cut off. In response to his cry, it bubbled slightly. Then, a single rat crawled out of the pool... even though the pool itself was not even an inch deep. Then, another, and then two more. All covered in the Servant's blood. His hand shaking, Peter tapped the cauldron, and its foul contents rose up into the air in a swirling green miasma. At his direction, it floated over and into the Goblet of Fire, which began to shake once more as if in anger. By now, more than a dozen blood-soaked rats were crawling over Peter, each chittering madly. The Animagus's eyes had changed colors, with one turning jet black and the other ruby red. He opened his mouth to scream, and down below, even Mr. January was unnerved as the rat-Animagus's mouth suddenly sprouted abnormally long and sharp incisors that were each several inches long. With an act of will, Peter regained control of his form, and those incisors retracted to their normal size so that he could speak clearly.

"I c-c-command thee, Goblet of Fire," he said in a raspy wheezing voice. "By my Will and by the Old Powers. I charge thee. To reveal the Enemy. To t-t-test the Enemy. With fire. With... with water. With mystery. And with death. To be... the c-c-crucible that will purify him... into... into the instrument of the Dark Lord's return. So... mote it be!"

He paused and took several shuddering breaths. He was on the last step.

"And with this final word, a word that strikes terror in the Dark Lord's enemies, I bind the Dark Lord and the Boy-Who-Lived together until the ritual is done!" He grasped Jim's wand with his bloody hand and thrust it up towards the sky.

"**MORSMORDRE!**" he screamed.

A bolt of magic shot from the wand up into the heavens and exploded, lighting up the sky like green fireworks that left behind a terrible afterimage. It was a colossal skull made of emerald stars, with a serpent protruding from its mouth like a tongue: The Dark Mark. Peter's eyes blazed and he summoned the last of his strength before jerking his arm down forcefully to point it at the Goblet of Fire. In response, the Dark Mark collapsed in on itself even as it poured down out of the sky. Somehow, it condensed down into a liquid form by the time it landed in the Goblet, filling it to overflowing. The Goblet shook and rattled violently as if furious at the violation. And from within, Peter could hear a terrible unearthly *hiss*. Then, the Goblet finally stilled, and for a few seconds, the ancient artifact turned *green* before fading back to its original hue.

Peter Pettigrew fell over onto his side, barely conscious, perhaps barely even alive. But after a few seconds, the Death Eater began to laugh deliriously. The ritual had been a success. The Servant had completed his first mission. Peter rolled over to look once more at the Goblet of Fire, which seemed as plain and innocuous as ever, though Peter knew it was primed for the task he'd set for it.

"Let the games begin."

Next: The Chaos continues.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2: What the Sinister Man is reading.

There Is Nothing To Fear by R. James Gouvreau, which I may have rec'd before but it's good enough to mention again. Imagine a Tom Riddle who wasn't pathologically afraid of dying. Imagine a Gryffindor Tom Riddle with no fear at all. Frequently terrifying.

Bonds of Grey and its sequel by Booklover3600 on AO3. It's a WBWL fic with the odd quirk that, in that universe, all characters (including Muggles, apparently) have the ability to form empathic bonds with other people, which leaves visible marks on the skin. EvilDumbledore and EvilLily, but has some interesting ideas.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: Paryanoia, AmaranthineWolf, BlueWater5, Darkarus, Professor of Runes, dragoria, Eclipse, EssayOfThoughts | Aich, Fredlf, kean, Krisni, Kylemagne, LFGB, raveenemarcus, Rubric of Ahriman, and Sakkiko. Thanks, guys.

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 16,692. Followers: 17,587. Favorites: 15,811. Communities: 240. Discord followers: 4346! Go Team POS!

The Quidditch World Cup, part 6

Chapter 13: The Quidditch World Cup, part 6

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Harry Black

and the Resurrection Game

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Chapter 13: The Quidditch World Cup Pt 6

The Devil's Tor

As soon as the crackling nimbus of Wild magic that had surrounded Pettigrew's ritual finally died down, the other two Death Eaters rushed to join him. Miss Direction pulled several vials from Pettigrew's box.

"Here, Peter," she said. Behind her, Mr. January's eyes narrowed at her concern... and her use of Mr. Norvegicus's first name. "Drink these. Blood-Replenishing Potions. And a Pepper-Up."

"Quite right, Norvegicus," January said blandly. "Your job's not done until the Cup's back in place."

Peter sneered at the other Death Eater. "I... know m'job, January," he said weakly. "Jes' gimme a sec."

Then, he grabbed Jim's wand and tossed it to the other man. "In the meantime, perhaps you should make yourself useful. Get that back to Jim Potter. Oh, after you clean my blood off it, of course. I assume that's within your... capabilities."

Crouch caught the wand easily. "I think I can manage," he said with a growl before turning and Apparating away.

Peter laid back on the rough stone of Devil's Tor and let the potions do their work while Narcissa looked down upon him with an expression of what might have been concern. Or perhaps just feigned concern. He knew all too well that it was impossible to tell the difference with her.

"You know... I think Mr. January might be feeling the pangs of jealousy," he said weakly.

"Don't be silly, Pettigrew," the woman chided. "He is a consummate professional. Why? Are you feeling jealous of him and the time we've spent together while doing our Lord's work?"

Pettigrew sneered. "Just hand me the Goblet and the toy mouse, witch. I've one thing left to do before I can crawl into bed and sleep for a week."

The British Sector

"You almost ready, Brother Mine?" George asked anxiously as he fired another Stunner. Luckily, the dark-haired girl (one of the Greengrasses, he thought) had an adequate shield spell, good enough at least to cover George while Fred hastily threw together some already-prepared potion ingredients he'd tossed into a bag before they fled the tent.

"Almost!" He reached into a pocket and pulled out a wrapped piece of candy which he tossed to Hannah. "Unwrap that, would you please, Abbott? And kindly don't eat it. It's meant for someone else."

Dumbfounded, Hannah did as she was told while Fred added the last ingredient. Meanwhile, Daphne recast her shield while George ducked down to grab a stick which he quickly transfigured into a hand catapult. Fred grabbed the candy-some kind of soft chewable with a yellow frosting shell-and dropped it into the vial in his hand. He stoppered it and then shook it vigorously for a few seconds.

"Right!" he said as he handed the vial to George. "Here's hoping I really am the smarter twin!"

George slipped the vial into the catapult's pocket and took a quick peek over the barricade to get his bearings. Then, he jumped up and shot the vial towards the attackers. It smashed against the barrier they were hiding behind and exploded into a yellow mist. There was the sound of loud coughing followed by three loud chirps.

"What was that?" Daphne asked.

"A Canary Crème modified into a gas form."

"A... Canary Crème?! What is that supposed to do?"

They were distracted by the sudden sight of three very large canaries taking wing and flying up into the sky.

"Okay," Daphne said. "Ask a silly question. How long does it last?"

"In gas form?" Fred began, only to be distracted when the canaries turned back into people... who then dropped fifty

feet back to the ground, screaming the whole way. "Not very long."

Suddenly, there was a scream from behind them. Tracey Davis had been at the rear of the group and was caught by surprise when the remaining attacker targeted her with a Summoning Charm, and she flew into his waiting arms.

"TRACEY!" Daphne cried out. Instantly, Fred and George had their wands pointed at the man (who they still saw as a Death Eater).

"Drop your wands! All of you!" snarled the man in a fury, while the terrified girl struggled in his iron grip. "Drop them or I'll kill the girl! I swear it! I'll kill-URRRK!"

His angry threats were cut off by something wrapping itself around his throat. Something very, very hot. He opened his mouth to scream but was unable to do so before his mask and hood caught fire! Then, there was a hard jerk on the flaming whip which sliced cleanly through the man's neck. The Death Eater's flaming head went flying while the body fell forward to pin the hysterical girl to the ground.

"Bloody hell!" George exclaimed, while beside him, Fred fought down the urge to vomit. Daphne ran forward and pulled the body off her friend, all the while trying to ignore the smell of burnt flesh coming from the neck stump which had been fully cauterized by the flaming whip. The two girls hugged each other tightly as they both continued to cry. Then, a shadow fell over them, and they looked up into the face of Lucius Malfoy.

"Are you alright... Miss Davis, I believe?"

Tracey looked up at her savior with wide eyes and nodded dumbly.

"Obviously, you have been through a terrible ordeal," Malfoy continued in gentle tones. "But if you will come with me, I assure you that we will have you Portkeyed to safety momentarily."

Suddenly, there was another scream, one of anguish rather than terror, that drew Malfoy's attention, and he moved quickly in that direction. The Weasley Twins were faster, for they recognized the voice of the one who cried out. It was their father.

"CHARLIE!" Fred cried out in horror upon seeing his brother, the one who'd gone to rescue Amos and Cedric Diggory, now lying in a pool of his own blood from where he'd been ravaged by some curse. Cedric was next to him, desperately casting the few Healing Charms he knew, while Arthur was kneeling on the other side clutching the young man's arm.

"HOLD ON, CHARLIE! HOLD ON!" he exhorted through his tears. Amos Diggory stood over them, wringing his hands piteously.

"I'm sorry, Arthur!" he blubbered. "It... it just happened so fast! It was... one of those damned Australians! Must have shot a curse through the tent! Me and Ced ducked out of the way, but the curse continued on and hit your poor boy!"

Cedric's head jerked up, and he stared at his father wide-eyed for a few seconds. But then, Charlie moaned softly, and the Hufflepuff returned to his desperate attempts at healing. Meanwhile, Lucius prepared another Portkey out of an empty butterbeer bottle he'd picked up off the ground.

"Here, Arthur. A quick casting but enough to send you and the boy straight to St. Mungo's. I will send the others along directly."

Arthur was too distraught to speak, but he nodded gratefully, and in a flash, they were gone. Lucius looked around the assembled group, his eyes coming to rest on Tracey and Daphne, who were still hugging one another tightly.

"If you will all bear with me, I will prepare another Portkey to send you to safety as well."

"I thank you, Mr. Malfoy," said Amos Diggory, as he reached down to pull Cedric to his feet. "But my boy and I will stay here."

He clapped his hand on Cedric's shoulder and squeezed. "The Ministry might need our help, right, son?"

Cedric simply looked at his father and nodded slowly. "What... whatever you think's best... Dad."

Lucius Malfoy studied the two Diggorys but said nothing as he prepared to fashion another Portkey.

The BMW Contingent

Sirius led the four children under his care as best he could through the increasingly panicked crowd. Explosions, screams, and the sounds of various curses could be heard coming from all directions. All five had their wands at the ready, but thus far, they'd not encountered any threats. Of course, that didn't mean that there weren't any threats nearby.

"*Massster*," whispered Harry's snake tattoo that had crawled up his back and neck to make itself heard. "*I sssensse a marked vessel nearby. It isss behind usss, but sssome*

disssstance away at the outer range of my sssenssssessss. I believe he isssssstalking usss. "

"Wonderful," Harry muttered under his breath. "Any good news?"

"I do not know if it can be conssssidered 'good' newssss, Massster, but it might be ussseful to know: the web of magic in the ssssky that preventssss usss from fleeing with magic issss a modified Dark Mark. "

Harry skidded to a stop. "Does that mean that someone Marked could Apparate or Portkey out of here?" he thought-asked.

Sirius and the others quickly stopped when they noticed Harry wasn't following.

"I sssusssspect sssso ." Harry fumed. It seemed that sending Lucius Malfoy a message to flee was a mistake, as he might have been their fast ticket out of danger. *"Alssso, the Death Eater sssstalking us is now about forty yardsss directly behind you. "*

The boy whirled around, but he couldn't see anyone who looked like a Death Eater, just scores of panicking campers. As the others came back to ask why he'd stopped, Harry opened up his Legilimency fully. For a second, he nearly swooned under the overwhelming waves of terror emanating from the crowd all around him. But then, he felt it: forty yards right in front of him, someone was projecting not fear but *hatred and cruelty* . As he focused on the source of those emotions, Harry reached up and tapped the side of his glasses in a rhythmic pattern. The enchanted glasses were already set to provide him with night-vision, but as they zoomed in like binoculars, Harry gasped. For just a second, he could see the shimmery outline of someone hiding under

an invisibility cloak and the glint of gold reflecting the moonlight. Suddenly, Harry realized that the hidden Death Eater was aiming a crossbow in their direction.

"Look out!" Harry screamed, but it was too late. Forty yards away, Tiberius Nott whispered two words as he pulled the trigger.

"Homorphus Animagus ."

The bolt shot towards the group while Harry and the other children ducked. Instantly, Sirius cast a Protego Maximus to cover him and the children. Unfortunately, while the tip of the bolt was only 50% orichalcum-commercial grade rather than from Boruslav Lestrangle's supplies-that was more than enough to shatter Sirius's shield spell. Sirius let out a scream of pain as the bolt slammed into his shoulder. Then, his eyes widened in surprise for a second before he changed involuntarily into a large black dog, one which still had a metal shaft sticking out of his left shoulder. The dog gave out an even louder howl of pain due to changing with the bolt head still inside him.

"STUPEFY!" Harry yelled while aiming at the spot where the crossbow had been, but there was a soft 'pop' and the Stunner went through that space without hitting anyone.

Harry cursed. His fears were confirmed. Their invisible assailant was a Death Eater, which meant that in addition to being invisible, he could also Apparate freely. With an angry snarl, Harry knelt to the ground and stabbed his wand into the soft earth. ***"FUMOSS MAXXXIMUS!"*** he hissed.

In response, a thick rolling mist practically erupted from the ground in nearly a 100-foot radius, enveloping Harry, his friends and family, and everyone else in range in an impenetrable fog. Then, he turned back to check on Sirius.

Neville had tried to pull the bolt out, but the head snapped off and stayed inside the whimpering dog's shoulder.

"Dammit!" Neville muttered.

"It's not your fault, Neville," Theo said. "The head's meant to snap off like that inside the target's body." He looked up towards Harry, though even at this close range, it was hard to see his friend's face clearly.

"This is one of my... one of Tiberius Nott's weapons. An enchanted crossbow that you can use as a spellcasting focus so that the spells will affect whoever gets hit. Can I assume there's a spell that can lock an Animagus in his animal form?" The black dog barked twice and nodded its head. "Right. And also the tip's orichalcum, so it can pierce through our shields."

"But why did he force Sirius into his Animagus form?" Amy asked in confusion. "If he can put a spell onto an armor-piercing crossbow bolt, why not just attach something more, I dunno, fatal?"

Theo sneered. "Tiberius Nott likes to think of himself as a sportsman. I'm sure chasing an injured Sirius Black while he was trapped in the form of a wounded animal would appeal to him."

Padfoot growled at that. Then, from somewhere in the distance, distinct over the ambient noise of the surrounding chaos, the group could hear a loud whistle. Instantly, the blood drained from Theo's face.

"Oh no," he whispered in sudden fear. "We have to move! Now!"

"Why?" Harry asked in a clipped tone while looking around for any sign of Nott. "What is it?"

Theo swallowed. "The bastard brought the Barghests with him!"

"Barghests," Amy said while pointing her wand at Padfoot. "Sounds dreadful. You can explain what they are on the way. **WINGARDIUM LEVIOSA**."

In response, the Grim gave another yelp as it rose up several feet into the air.

"Let me do that, Amy," Harry said.

"Stop being chivalrous and think it through, Cousin!" she snapped. "You three know more combat spells than I do. I'll levitate Sirius. You three get in a circle around us and stay on guard."

Neville laughed despite the tense situation. "You may not know the combat spells, Amy, but you've got the tactics down, I reckon."

"I'm a Slytherin, Neville. We have tactics for making it to the breakfast table on time. Harry, you're in front. You summoned this fog, which means you're the only one who can see through it. And you are the dueling champion, right?"

"Why yes," he answered while raising his wand to cast a few spells. "Yes, I am."

Elsewhere in the British Sector...

As he limped along on an improvised crutch, Senior Auror John Dawlish wondered (and not for the first time) why he'd insisted on going to the Auror Academy instead of following his mother's footsteps and working in a pet shop. He'd been directing frightened civilians towards the forest and taking potshots at terrorists who crossed his path since the attack started, all the while looking for fellow Aurors in the hopes that they could mount an organized counterattack.

But there had been too much confusion to find anyone from the Ministry in the dark, and that was before this magical fog had materialized. He was pretty sure it was an overpowered Fumos, but he'd never encountered a Fumos that resisted his best attempts at a Finite. And to make matters worse, the crowd had panicked and then stampeded his position like a herd of startled cattle. Dawlish was knocked to the ground and then had his ankle sprained when someone trod on it. He managed to scramble to safety before he got trampled to death and then transfigure a crutch for himself. But Healing Charms were tricky, and he needed a few minutes of peace and quiet to patch up his ankle. Since he didn't know when he was going to get a few minutes of peace and quiet, he cast the Supersensory Charm instead.

The Charm improved his night vision somewhat, but the sounds of screams and explosions were overwhelming. Dawlish closed his eyes and concentrated. Years of training with the Charm had taught him how to selectively block his heightened senses, and he quickly programmed his mind to ignore those sounds that were confusing or even dangerous and focused on useful information... such as the sound of Pius Thicknesse's voice as he bellowed out orders from a position roughly 150 yards to the south. Dawlish pulled himself up onto his crutch and prepared to hobble that way when he heard a different and most unexpected sound from much closer. It was the sound of some large animal moving

in his general direction at a fair clip, accompanied by low steady growls. The Auror looked in that direction but saw no such animal even with his augmented vision. But he did see several fleeing citizens knocked to the ground by something, and a few seconds later, he watched as that same something barreled over a picnic table, sending the food left there flying.

"**REVELIO** !" the Auror yelled.

The Revealing Charm struck its target, but to Dawlish's surprise, the creature did not become fully visible. Instead, it flashed visibly for just a second, revealing itself as an incredibly large canine of some kind, before disappearing once more. The Auror's eyes widened. He knew that there were some animals that were naturally invisible, but he knew of no canines with that property. Deciding to err on the side of caution, Dawlish listened for the sound of the creature's movement and then sent a Stunner towards it. There was a flash as the spell struck, but the beast did not go down. Instead, it skidded to a halt, and to Dawlish's sudden alarm, there was a distinctly menacing snarl. Instantly, he sent off a Cutting Curse in that direction, but there was a soft pop, and the curse passed through empty air.

"Shit!" Dawlish spat in frustration tinged with dread. Then, he heard a second pop not far behind him.

"SHIIIT!" he yelled as he desperately whirled around and tried to bring his wand to bear. But it was too late. Whatever the creature was, it slammed into the Auror with the force of a wrecking ball, knocking him to the ground and pinning him. Dawlish's eyes widened in terror. He still couldn't even see what had attacked him, but he could hear its low,

hungry growl, and he could feel its fetid breath just inches from his face.

"Unbelievable," he thought ruefully. *"I'm about to have my face eaten off, and I don't even get to know what's doing it!"*

Dawlish squeezed his eyes shut and waited for the end. But then, from somewhere in the distance, he heard a strange whistle. The invisible creature evidently heard it too, as its head quickly jerked up away from the Auror's face. Then, there was yet another pop as the creature Apparated away. Dawlish let out a slow, shaky breath and then pulled himself up to his feet. He needed to find Pius and report this... whatever this was. Then, he sniffed the air and looked down before cursing softly.

"Okay," he thought. *"I'll cast a quick Scourgify on my trousers and then go find Pius."*

Some distance away, Tiberius Nott took the bone whistle from his mouth and pocketed it. He'd held Sköll and Hati in reserve until now because letting the two invisible hellhounds run amok amidst the crowd might have drawn unwelcome attention from the Ministry. The plan was to pin the violence on the Australians, who were either using Muggle guns or wearing fake Death Eater uniforms. Introducing a pair of Barghests ran a risk-minuscule, Tiberius thought, but still a risk-of 'muddying the message,' seeing as how Barghests were associated with the Dark Lord Grindelwald.

But Harry Black, in an annoyingly impressive bit of spellcraft, had summoned up a thick fog bank that neutralized the advantages of Nott's invisibility cloak. So,

the Death Eater Apparated to a position outside the range of the Fumos Maxima and between the campsite and the forest. Tiberius wasn't sure whether the blood traitors were simply headed for the forest to find cover or whether they were seeking to escape in the Muggle conveyance that had brought Sirius Black here at the start of the Cup Quarterfinals. But they were clearly headed in this direction. He loaded another of his special bolts into the crossbow and whispered to it.

"Portus: The Dungeons at Nott Manor ." Then, he raised the magical crossbow to his shoulder, activated its magical targeting scope... and waited.

The Australian Sector

After twenty minutes of furious snogging in Delphini White's private tent, she and Bill Weasley might have been forgiven for not recognizing the sounds of rumbling in the distance. After all, poets and bards have often compared romance to "feeling the earth move underfoot." More importantly, at Delphini's request, Bill had put up a Silencing Ward to block the noises from the campgrounds outside. Despite their best efforts at seclusion, however, the two were suddenly distracted from the throes of passion by an enormous spectral rabbit whose sudden arrival caused Bill to utter a somewhat embarrassing shriek before falling off the cot they had been using.

"Delphini!" snapped a booming Australian voice that emanated from the Patronus, "The Australian Sector is under attack. People in Death Eater apparel, some of them werewolves. You might want to put your scanties back on and send Lover Boy packing! Then get to the VIP area! I'll join you when I'm able."

She exhaled angrily. "Typical," she said. "Always when I'm in the middle of something."

"What the hell was that?!" Bill asked in surprise as he picked himself up off the floor.

"A Flemish rabbit named Big Jake," she replied while hastily pulling her dress back on. "Buck MacMillan's Patronus. He's overseeing my Defense Mastery."

Oddly embarrassed at being caught in flagrante delicto by a Patronus, Bill fumbled for his trousers.

"I've never seen one that big before," he said.

Delphini smirked. "Oh, Bill! You've nothing to feel insecure over!"

"I meant a rabbit that big!" he said huffily.

The girl just laughed and then cautiously exited the tent with Bill close behind. Immediately, they were both shocked by the scene. While the fighting had not yet made its way to their location, they could now hear the sounds of screams all around, along with the crackle of the roaring flames that lit up the night sky.

"This is... terrible!" Bill said in shock.

Delphini nodded while contemplating about her mixed emotions as she idly cast an Extinguishing Charm at a nearby souvenir stall that had been set ablaze. The thought of violence striking the Quidditch World Cup was awful... and yet, she could not deny that something about it called to her. Or rather, to the last vestiges of Bellatrix Lestrange and Miss Demeanor remaining inside her. As the sound of screams grew louder, Delphini White suddenly felt a desire

to do terrible violence, just like the old days. Only now, her targets of choice would be different. Buck had said there were Death Eaters around. And she wanted very much to find them and say *hello* .

"You should return to your family, Bill," she said while striding off towards the VIP section. "Though I would recommend zipping your fly up first."

Bill blushed and adjusted his trousers before jogging after her. "Come with me! You're not safe here!"

As if in response to the young man's words, a crowd of panicking Australians came tearing around the corner followed by a half-dozen Death Eaters flinging curses and another half-dozen partially transformed werewolves loping after their targets on all fours. Bill stepped in front of Delphini, his Gryffindor chivalry on full display.

"Run for it! I'll hold them off!" he yelled while preparing to cast a Shield spell to buy her time to get away. But she didn't run. Instead, to his surprise, she leaned in and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"You. Are. *Adorable* !" she said before aiming her wand down the street.

"*FULMINATA* !"

In response, a bolt of pure lightning burst from her wand to arc neatly over the fleeing Australians to strike a werewolf whose body promptly exploded with enough force to knock his compatriots to the ground. And with that, she was off-not running down the street towards the Death Eaters and werewolves, but simply striding their way completely without concern while batting aside the few spells that came close enough to strike her.

"CONFRINGO! AVIS OPPUGNO HORRIBILIS! PILUM ARGENTO! EXPULSO MAXIMA! "

As Bill watched in amazement, the slip of a girl he'd just been snogging proceeded to light up the area with curses. Lightning strikes. Silver javelins that struck the werewolves with deadly precision. A flock of birds with razor-sharp metal talons. And a variety of explosive Charms.

"Wow," he whispered to himself before jogging after the girl.

Moments later, they were approaching the VIP section when the unmistakable sounds of the Killing Curse could be heard. Immediately, Delphini took cover, with Bill close behind. While she'd been confident against the Death Eaters she'd encountered so far, she privately doubted any of them were true Death Eaters. Or if they were, the group's discipline had lapsed greatly during Bellatrix Lestrange's time in Azkaban. Whoever was inside the VIP tent, however, was proficient with the Avada Kedavra, which suggested a higher threat level.

She was also concerned about the implications of the Killing Curse being used in the VIP tent, but to her surprise, the most important potential target had survived... for the time being, at least. For at that moment, Alexander McAvity was dragged out of the tent in the company of three British Aurors. Though he was still alive, McAvity was somewhat the worse for wear. He had a long bloody gash on his forehead and was stumbling along with his hands bound behind him.

"I suppose it's too much to hope that the Aurors are just taking McAvity to safety, huh," she said ruefully.

"Well, since those aren't Aurors, I'd say no," he answered. "Black masks aren't a part of the normal Auror uniform."

She nodded as the group drew nearer. "Any suggestions?"

Bill blinked. "From *me* ? After you pulverized those Death Eaters back there?"

"Yes, I know. I was magnificent. But they have a hostage now, darling, and sadly, subtlety is not one of my strong suits."

The young Curse-breaker thought for a moment and then whispered an incantation. "**CAVE INIMICUM** ." Immediately, Delphini noticed a slight heat haze in the air around them.

"They won't be able to see or hear us," he said softly. "Let them get past and then attack from behind. I'd recommend Stupefy instead of lightning bolts though."

Delphini snickered at that. The two of them watched cautiously as the false Aurors roughly dragged the Australian dignitary past. Then, Bill dropped his camouflage, and the two fired off Stunners, immediately taking down two of the three Aurors. The last one whirled around and used McAvity as a human shield.

"Drop your wands!" he snarled. "Drop them or-!"

"**STUPEFY!** " Delphini's Stunner hit McAvity in the chest, and the man barely had enough time to register his surprise before he slumped to the ground at his captor's feet. The Auror looked down at the man in shock only to be hit a second later by Bill's Stunner.

"What the hell was that?!" Bill exclaimed as the two jogged over. "You could have gotten McAvity killed?!"

Delphini was unrepentant. "When in doubt, always shoot the hostage. That's basic conflict resolution."

"You're crazy, you know that?"

She smirked. "A little, I suppose. I'm told it runs in the family. But honestly, Bill? I think that's why you're so attracted to me!"

Sadly, Delphini's flirtations were interrupted by an angry bellow from behind them.

"FREEZE! DROP YOUR WANDS!"

The pair turned to see a group of wizards storming around the side of the VIP tent, all wearing the distinctive red coats of British Hit Wizards. Unlike the imposters on the ground, these wizards and witches were not masked, and leading the group was DMLE Director Corban Yaxley, who looked furious to see them standing over what certainly appeared to be three Aurors and a visiting dignitary, all unconscious or worse at their hands.

Delphini performed a few quick calculations to figure the likelihood of taking down all the Hit Wizards without killing any of them and thereby causing an international incident. They were not good. With an exasperated sigh, she dropped her wand to the ground and slowly raised her hands, with Bill following her lead.

The Luxembourg Sector

Thinking that the attackers might prefer to go after the more populated areas in search of richer target opportunities, Archie carefully led his two charges through the half-empty Luxembourg sector. While the Kumar Pasha and his entourage had left the World Cup early, there were still a few tents left, plus a bonfire still burning low in the central commons. But there weren't many people, and Archie hoped

they could get through quickly to the woods on the other side and the carpark waiting beyond it. It was not to be.

Just as the three passed the bonfire, a voice behind them cried out "**AVADA KEDAVRA** !" Archie jumped forward, knocking Dan and Hermione to the ground in the process, and the Killing Curse flew over their heads. Archie immediately rolled over and came up firing.

"LACERO! "

Pursuing them were three figures in Death Eater robes. The Cutting Curse clipped one of them and he staggered but did not fall. The other two returned fire.

"Blimey!" exclaimed Dan Granger, who had no natural antipathy towards either Death Eaters or Australians, and so just saw men in white robes. "It's the bloody KKK!"

"Stay down!" Archie yelled before firing off a volley of spells. Two of the Death Eaters went down quickly, but the third (the one who'd shrugged off the Lacero) gave a bestial snarl as he picked up a nearby bench and hurled it at the wizard. Archie tried to dodge but wasn't fast enough, and the impact knocked him down and sent his wand flying. Instantly, the Death Eater-who was clearly a werewolf-charged the prone wizard. As the werewolf fell on him, Archie desperately used the remains of the bench as a shield to stop the dark creature from biting his face off, but the wizard still screamed as his attacker's claws dug into his shoulder.

Then, before the werewolf could press his attack, Archie was rescued by an unlikely savior, as Dan rushed forward, snatched a burning log from the edge of the bonfire and made use of it as an impromptu cricket bat. He nailed the werewolf in the face with the flaming end of the log and

knocked him away from Archie. The werewolf rolled and came up in a crouch. Dan charged, intending to hit the werewolf in the head again, but the werewolf just thrust his arm up, and Dan's makeshift weapon shattered against it. Then, the werewolf knocked Dan to the ground with a vicious backhand before leaping towards the Muggle's prone body with both claws outstretched.

"*SECTUMSEMPRA!*"

Instead of a werewolf, it was only a splatter of blood that landed on Dan Granger. With a terrible yelp of agony, the werewolf was flung back and landed some ten feet away with long gashes opening up all over his body as if he'd been hacked at with a chain saw. The werewolf's body twitched for a few seconds and then went still.

Dan pulled himself up from the ground and looked around for the source of the curse. Nearby, he saw his little girl Hermione, her wand trembling violently in her hands and tears pouring down her cheeks.

The BMW Contingent

"A Barghest is an enormous hound-like creature created through Dark magic," Theo explained breathlessly while the group made their way through Harry's magical fog. They were also traveling under cover of a Muffliato Charm centered on Padfoot, whose bleeding they had finally stopped, and Harry hoped that it and the other Charms he'd cast would let them evade any other attacks.

"Grindelwald created and deployed whole packs of them," Theo continued, "but he gifted two to Cantankerous Nott Sr. back in the 1930s."

"And they're still alive?!" Neville exclaimed.

"Alex told me that they age very slowly so long as they're... fed properly." Theo swallowed. "He was really evasive on what exactly my father and grandfather considered proper food but... I'm pretty sure it's Muggles and Squibs. Regardless, they're also really strong and damage resistant, they can shrug off most spells, they're naturally invisible to anyone not of House Nott, and they can even do short-range Apparation."

"Short-range...?!" Amy sputtered. "Wait! How can they Apparate while under the Anti-Apparition Jinx? It's not like they could have the Dark Mark!"

Through all of Theo's explanations, Harry stayed silent, as he concentrated on maintaining his spells, one of which also required an Occlumency dilation. Mark answered the unspoken question of his primary mind.

"I sssuspect, my Massster, that the jinx which covers thisss ssspace only blocksss wizarding Apparition, and not that of creaturesss who can do so naturally. "

Amy snorted contemptuously. "Well that's just ridiculously overpowered! What did your family even do with creatures like that? What did you even need them for?"

Theo grimaced. "Alex said our grandfather used them for Muggle hunting. Tiberius probably would have as well, but after the Dark Lord fell, he was afraid to go on hunts anymore, or at least not people hunts. If he were caught, it might undermine his Imperius defense. In fact, I've always suspected the main reason he joined the Death Eaters in the first place was so he'd be able to get his kicks murdering Muggles. Anyway, Barghests are smarter than most dogs

and very well-trained, but they go into blood-frenzies at the scent of Muggles or even Squibs."

"Charming," Neville muttered, but then, the boy's eyes widened in concern. "Oh Hell! Dan! He's still out there with Hermione and Archie! And they're headed this way! What do we do?"

Harry's expression was grim as he finally spoke. "Simple. We kill these Barghest things before Dan gets close enough for them to get his scent." He signaled for the others to stop. Then, the boy closed his eyes in concentration. "We're at the edge of the mist, about thirty feet from the forest. Stay close."

Through the magical scope mounted onto his crossbow, Tiberius Nott watched as the four children and their "dog" exited the magical fogbank and carefully made their way across the gap between the campsite and the nearby woods. The Death Eater grinned. He had an easy shot at the girl, and once she was locked away in his dungeon, the rest became expendable. Well, not the No-Name boy, of course. Nott was sworn not to harm the filthy brat... physically, at least. The trauma of watching his friends be torn apart by the Barghests would be harm enough. Idly, he wondered if using a Portkey on Amy Wilkes would also cause Sirius Black to accompany her to the magic-suppressing dungeon cell that awaited her, since the injured Animagus was presently supported by her spell.

"I imagine having her cousin to play with would please Narcissa mightily," Nott thought to himself as he pulled the trigger. The bolt flew through the air to hit Amy Wilkes center-mass.

And passed right through her.

Instantly, the girl suddenly disappeared, though not from the Death Eater's Portkey Arrow. Instead, the bolt flew past the group to strike the wreckage of a tent, which was immediately Portkeyed to Nott's dungeons instead. The Death Eater gaped in confusion and then cursed loudly as the others vanished as well. They were Doppelgangers! With a snarl, he pulled his whistle back out and blew a short message to his hounds. They would not be fooled so easily.

Not far away, Harry and his friends were proceeding slowly towards the woods. They were under cover of Lucius Malfoy's Mass Disillusionment Charm, but the spell required those hidden by it to move slowly or it would fail. At the same time, Harry had also been directing a Doppelganger Defense for himself and all of his friends, though maintaining both spells was mentally exhausting and required a three-way partition of his mind. When the young Slytherin felt the Amy-Doppelganger fall, he released the rest of his magical duplicates and focused on keeping the Mass Disillusionment up. Harry had been annoyed when Lucius had actually demanded a thousand Galleons and a secrecy oath before teaching him the proprietary magic, but at the moment, it was worth every Knut. Then, somewhere in the distance, he heard the whistle that Tiberius Nott used to summon and command his hellhounds. He looked around but couldn't sense their pursuers... yet. The woods were only ten feet away. Close enough.

"On the count of three," he said just loudly enough for his friends to hear. "Run for it. One. Two. Three!"

Then, Harry ran for the woods with the others close behind. Neville was the last, and he was startled when a bolt missed him by less than a foot and struck a nearby tree. To his further surprise, the bottom third of the tree disappeared with a loud pop, causing the upper two-thirds of it to crash

to the ground. Apparently, there was a weight limit to the Portkey Arrows, and an entire tree exceeded it. As the others pushed ahead, Neville looked around and noticed several small thorny bushes along the pathway. He turned and pointed his wand at one behind them.

"*HERBIVICUS MAXIMUS!*" Instantly, the bushes began to grow at an incredible rate, and within seconds, they had completely blocked the path behind them, and their thorns had grown to several inches long. Neville grinned and began firing off the spell at every marginally dangerous plant the group passed as they ran through the woods. Soon, the pathway behind them was blocked by a thorny barrier of unnaturally large plants. It might not block wizards and beasts that could Apparate, but they would still have to be careful where they materialized.

But then, Neville's blood ran cold as he heard a terrible howl in the distance... followed by a distinctive popping sound. An instant later, there was a second pop, followed by a howl that was much closer. After a few minutes, Amy had to stop due to the strain of running while levitating Sirius, so Harry had the group gather for a few seconds to catch their breath. He cast a Muffliato while they talked.

"They're getting closer," Neville said. "How far can they Apparate at a time?"

"Not far, I think," Theo replied. "No more than thirty feet per jump, I reckon. It's for hunting rather than distance travel. They blink around to disorient their prey."

Harry cast the Supersensory Charm. Then, he closed his eyes and focused on his Legilimency, now boosted by the Charms. There was another pop in the distance. Without opening his eyes, Harry pointed over Neville's shoulder.

"One of them is that way, about two hundred yards." Then, he pointed in a different direction. "The other one is that way, about a hundred yards and closing."

"Is there a Charm to mask our scents?" Amy asked.

"Not a useful one," Theo answered. "They hunt by the scent of our magic." Then, he looked at Harry. "Maybe we should split up."

At that, Sirius let out a loud bark, which Harry assumed meant disagreement, and tried to stand. But as soon as the Grim put any weight on the injured leg, he let out a yelp of pain and laid back down.

"Can we get that arrowhead out of him at least?" Neville asked.

"He'd bleed to death," Harry said, still with his eyes closed in thought. The Barghests were coming closer. Then, Harry's eyes widened as he detected a third pop less than fifty feet away, follow quickly by the plink of a crossbow firing.

"GET DOWN!" Harry screamed before shoving Amy to the ground. Theo and Neville both dove for cover as well, as another bolt flew overhead to strike a nearby tree. As before, the bottom of the tree disappeared, leaving the upper section to fall to the ground. Unfortunately, this time, it was falling directly towards Theo and Neville. Both boys scrambled as quickly as they could, but while Theo managed to roll free in time, a heavy limb managed to catch Neville's legs just below the knees with a savage crunch! The Gryffindor screamed.

Incensed, Harry turned back towards the direction from whence the bolt came. He couldn't see Nott, but he had a general idea of where he'd been standing. "**BOMBARDA**

MAXIMA! " The forest was rocked by an explosion from about fifty feet away, and Harry was rewarded by the sound of a bellow of pain and fear, followed by a pop as the cowardly Death Eater Apparated away.

"With luck," Harry thought angrily, "the bastard will have splinched himself!"

He and Theo then rushed to Neville, who was still pinned beneath the tree and whose face was a mask of agony. "M-my legs! I th-think they're broken!"

Instantly, Harry and Theo both cast a Wingardium Leviosa on the fallen tree trunk, and while it was too heavy to move, they were able to raise it up enough for Amy to pull Neville free. Instantly, they knew the boy was correct, as both his shins and feet were nearly crushed by the impact. Despite the pain, Neville looked up to Harry with a fierce expression.

"Get the rest of them out of here, Harry!" he gasped. "I won't be able to even walk, let alone run."

"I'm not leaving you!"

"Just go, Harry!" Theo said heatedly. "I'll stay with Neville." Harry started to argue, but Theo cut him off. "You know that Tiberius isn't after me or Neville. We'll be okay! Just get Amy and Sirius out of here!"

Harry grimaced in anger, but he knew Theo was right, and he was faced with the cruel task of prioritizing his friends and loved ones. Sirius was injured. Amy was the least combat capable of the group. More importantly, as Theo had also realized, Amy must be Nott's primary target because the first Portkey Arrow had been meant for her. Up until a few months ago, Nott and Amy had been betrothed as part of some sick scheme of the Death Eater's to marry the girl

and then steal her inheritance. What that inheritance was exactly Harry had no idea. But it was something important enough for Peter Pettigrew to stage a werewolf attack on Hogsmeade in order to kidnap her before Nott could claim her. But neither of Harry's adoptive brothers was a likely target of Nott's, and so, hopefully, they would be safe if separated from the other three.

"Alright. Keep your heads down, and once the Barghests are past, send a Patronus to Regulus for help." Then, he put his hands on both boys' shoulders. "Don't die. That's an order."

Neville chuckled. "Well, I'm a Gryffindor, so you're not the Prince of me! But I'll do my best."

Then, Harry led Amy and Sirius away, idly wondering if he should have hugged his two brothers before going. He still wasn't sure exactly when to initiate such gestures.

"Come on," he said to Amy, who levitated the injured dog Animagus once more while Harry Disillusioned the three of them.

Quite some distance away, "the bastard" materialized without splinching himself but with shrapnel from an exploded tree trunk embedded in his leg. And worse, the shrapnel had sliced his invisibility cloak. It still worked, but imperfectly now. With a snarl of pain, he sat down on a stump to heal himself before resuming the hunt. Despite his injuries, the Death Eater grinned. For once, his prey unexpectedly had teeth, which would make his hunt all the more enjoyable.

St. Mungo's Hospital

With a loud CRACK, Arthur and Charlie Weasley materialized on the floor of St. Mungo's designated Portkey arrival point. Instantly, the older wizard screamed for assistance, and several orderlies rushed over to Charlie, who was unconscious and ghastly pale. They levitated the stricken boy onto a gurney and quickly wheeled him into the ER. Arthur started to follow, but one of the orderlies yelled at him to wait in the lobby. Then, he heard a familiar voice coming from behind him.

"DAD!" It was Ron. The boy was racing down the hallway towards him with Ginny and (somewhat surprisingly) Draco. Ron skidded to a halt just a few feet away, his eyes widening. "Dad? Are you okay?!"

Confused, Arthur looked down. He had bloodstains all over his shirt and trousers. "I'm... I'm fine son. This... isn't m-my blood."

And then, to the surprise of his two youngest children, Arthur Weasley's face crumpled, and with a sob, he pulled Ron and Ginny into a tight hug while weeping piteously. Draco held back, unwilling to intrude on such a tense family reunion. Just a moment later, there was a second CRACK, and a larger group of refugees materialized in the arrival area: Lucius Malfoy, the Weasley Twins, and all the other children who'd been with them at the campsite. Fred and George rushed to join their family.

"How is Charlie?" George asked urgently. Arthur just shook his head dazedly.

"Charlie?!" Ginny exclaimed. "What about Charlie?!"

"... Dad?" Ron asked in a frightened voice. It was George who answered.

"He... he took a curse from one of those Death Eaters," the boy said in a shaken voice. "He... it didn't look good."

"Charlie's in the Emergency Ward now," Arthur said in a broken voice. "They won't let us in."

Though the door was shut, there was a large window nearby through which the Weasleys could only watch in dismay as the increasingly frantic Healers tried to save Charlie's life. Even through the glass, Ron could hear the spells being cast. Several of them he even knew, though he'd never had the chance to cast them. While the St. Mungo's staff were experts and could heal most magical maladies, it seemed that the curse used was a high-powered Diffindo. Strictly speaking, it wasn't a Dark Curse of the sort that would resist magical healing. But a powerful enough Severing Charm could cut through steel cables, and at point blank range, it could damage vital organs beyond the capacity of most healing magic to repair.

By this point, Molly had arrived, and once informed of Charlie's condition, she burst into tears. Arthur pulled her into a tight hug.

"Where's Bill?" she finally asked.

"He went..." Fred began before George discreetly nudged him.

"We got separated," the older twin said quickly. "I think he was helping some of the Ministry people. But he was okay the last time I saw him. I'm sure he'll be fine."

As the rest of his family talked quietly, Ron moved to the edge of the window, never taking his eyes off his injured brother and the Healers desperately trying to save him. He'd spent time working with Bhaskar Gupta and the other

Healers in Shamballa, and while their magic was different in many ways, a lot of the procedures were the same. For instance, there was a bell hanging above Charlie's bed which was ringing loudly but slowly... and getting slower. The boy knew that the bell was enchanted to ring in time with the patient's heart, and its tempo was slowing because Charlie's heartbeat was doing the same. And then, just like that, the bell went silent.

"No heartbeat!" yelled one of the Healers. "Start a Cardio-Stimulant Charm! Now!"

Arthur's hand slammed against the glass in frustration while a devastated Molly buried her face in her husband's chest. Their children were all equally as distraught... all except their youngest boy, who simply watched the scene impassively. Then, Ron turned, strode swiftly towards the ER doors, and pushed his way in.

"Hold it, kid!" said an orderly as he reached for Ron's shoulder. "I'm sorry, but you're not allowed in-GYAAAH!"

Without even looking at the orderly, Ron just grabbed the man's hand, dug his thumb into the center of the palm, and twisted slightly. The orderly staggered back in shock and grabbed his arm which had just gone completely numb from the shoulder on down. Without hesitating, the Gryffindor strode right up to Charlie's bedside, shoving two of the Healers aside, and placed his wand directly over the gaping chest wound.

And then, Ron Weasley HISSSED!

Pandemonium erupted as all of the Healers who had been working on Charlie practically jumped away in fear. Several people screamed upon hearing Parseltongue spoken aloud, and there was a loud crash as someone dropped a tray of

potion vials to the floor. Suddenly, a new sound broke through the din, as the silent bell over Charlie's bed began to ring furiously. Then, the young man's whole body spasmed, and with a loud gasp, his eyes shot wide open. As Ron's hissing continued, Charlie began to scream in pain. One of the Healers stepped closer and watched in awe as damaged organs that should have taken weeks to heal in the best of conditions suddenly knitted themselves back together before his eyes. Within seconds, Charlie Weasley's seemingly fatal wounds had been healed. Charlie himself lapsed back into unconsciousness, but his breathing and heart rate were steady. Save for some faint scarring (and, of course, shredded and blood-soaked clothing), there was little sign that he'd ever even been injured.

Ron went silent, took a deep breath, and then slowly looked around the room. Everyone was staring at him in shocked amazement, including his family members who had followed him into the ER.

"Right," he finally said, though his voice was scratchy, as if he had a bad sore throat. "I reckon you all have questions."

And then, the Parselmouth's eyes fluttered and rolled back up into his head just before his legs gave way. Ron fell to the floor in a dead faint.

The Forest

After Harry and the others left, Theo did the best he could to make Neville comfortable and heal his injuries, but from what he recalled of Professor Lockhart's first aid unit, the damage to the Gryffindor's legs were beyond any Healing Charms he knew.

"Assuming, of course, we live long enough to get to a Healer," the Slytherin thought ruefully. His ruminations ended when he heard the sound of a large creature crashing through the brush in their direction. And to Theo's surprise, he could almost see it. That is to say, he could not see the Barghest itself, but he could see a strange nimbus that outlined its shape. Theo swallowed deeply. As the creature slowly approached, Neville could only hear the sounds of a low panting growl but could not identify its source. But to Theo's eyes, it was big, something in the shape of a huge mastiff but about the size of a tiger.

Theo's wand felt loose in his hand. If Harry were here, Theo was sure he'd be able to kill the beast with Parselmagic, but that wasn't an option for either him or Neville. Suddenly, the Barghest turned to look in their direction, and then, it charged. Desperately, both boys fired off the strongest curses they knew, but the creature was unaffected.

When it was within ten feet, a terrified Theo finally cried out "NO!"

And to his surprise, the Barghest slid to a stop! Theo could see its hazy outline as the beast stood still, and it began to sniff the air. Theo's eyes narrowed. Then, the Barghest cocked its head in confusion before taking a tentative step towards Neville. Theo moved in front of him and pointed not his wand but his finger straight at the creature.

"I SAID NO!" he snapped with authority. "BAD DOG!"

And in response, the terrifying hellhound bowed its head submissively and took a step back while giving a piteous whine. Neville looked over to Theo in astonishment while the Slytherin tried to figure out what to do next. The Barghests were well-trained, but he doubted that a command to "Heel"

or "Play Dead" was in its repertoire. But the question was answered for him when another whistle sounded in the distance, and the Barghest charged forward only to bound over the two boys and the fallen tree they were leaning against to head off after their friends.

"Did... did you just...?" Neville stammered.

Theo nodded dumbly. "I *know* ! I can't *believe* that worked! They hunt by the scent of magic, and they're trained to obey the magic of House Nott. I guess even after everything with the disownment and the Ultimate Sanction, I'm still just enough of a Nott to order them. Or confuse them, at least."

Neville laughed, but then grew pensive. "You need to follow it. I reckon it's going after Harry, and you might be able to help him and the others. More than you could me, anyway, unless you think you can carry me on your shoulders."

"But..."

"I'll be fine!" Neville said earnestly. "I'll send a Patronus to Regulus to say where I am. And he knows all those Auror-level Healing Charms. Now go!"

Theo took a moment to clap Neville on the shoulder before running off after the Barghest. Then, the Gryffindor summoned his Patronus and gave it a message to deliver to their friends. His message sent, Neville leaned back against the tree trunk, only to stiffen a few moments later at the sound of another howl drawing nearer. The boy gripped his wand tightly, not knowing which he'd prefer: A Barghest coming upon him in his current state? Or one that ignored him to go after his friends without him even having the chance to slow it down.

With a look of determination, Neville glanced around the area by the dim light of his Lumos. About twenty feet away, there was a large Blackthorn bush. He cast a spell he'd learned in Herbology that levitated the bush, roots and all, over to him before replanting it in the ground right in front of him. Then, he cast the Plant Growth Charm on it several times, along with a few more Charms that shaped the growing plant into a protective hedge while also increasing the sharpness and durability of its thorns. Thus fortified, Neville leaned back against the fallen tree trunk and tried to think of anything else he could do. After a few seconds, an idea came to him.

"Idiot!" he thought. "Should have thought of this ages ago!" And then, Neville summoned his Patronus again and sent another message with it. Only then did he lean back against the tree trunk to rest and wait for someone to come.

He was disappointed but not terribly surprised when the first someone to arrive was actually the other Barghest which popped into the clearing on the other side of the boy's improvised hedge. It growled hungrily before charging the bush. Knowing that his toughest spells wouldn't hurt the beast, Neville focused on spells to increase the bush's durability and size, hoping he could push the Barghest back. But the invisible creature was powerful and tough. Slowly but surely, it tore at the thorny branches faster than Neville's spells could repair the damage. Desperately, Neville thought about everything he knew about magical horticulture, and despite his youth, it was a lot. No one in Magical Britain knew as much about the cultivation of magical plants and also the magical cultivation of mundane plants as the House of Longbottom.

"It's in your blood, Neville," Uncle Algie had told him once as a child, back before the awful truth about Algie Longbottom

came out. "*It's your birthright.* "

As the bush started to break under the onslaught, Neville reached up to grab a branch with his free hand to steady it, heedless of the pain as the thorns dug into his hand. Suddenly, it was as though he could feel the plant in its entirety. Its need for water and sun and earth to take root in. Its pain as the Barghest tore at it. And strangely, its desire to protect. And with that, Neville recalled one of the memories that Algie had taken from him in his youth: the memory of being locked in a room full of Venomous Tentacula, Devil's Snare, and other deadly plants, all of which were content to *play* with the boy instead of tearing him apart.

Neville dropped his wand and grabbed hold of a branch with that hand as well, wincing as the thorns tore into the flesh. Then, he snarled out two words.

"*Get 'Em !*"

Instantly, the bush practically surged forward, its branches shooting out and wrapping themselves around the Barghest's legs, neck and head, seeking out any vulnerable spots. As sharp thorns lashed at the beast's eyes and mouth, the Barghest growled in anger and pain-and then fear. Finally, after several seconds, there was a loud pop as the creature Apparated. It reappeared some twenty feet away with a loud yelp that quickly receded into the distance. Neville sighed and gingerly pulled his hands off of the bloody thorns to rest them at his side.

"Good boy."

St. Mungo's

After a few seconds of panic, the Chief Healer in the ER directed that the unconscious Ron Weasley be moved to a private room for examination and observation. He also gathered all the Healers, Mediwitches and Medi wizards, and orderlies in the Emergency Ward and declared that the boy's use of Parseltongue was to be considered a matter of patient confidentiality and thus would be covered by their magical oaths. He then informed the other Weasleys that as soon as his examination of Ron was complete, they would be allowed to remain in the room with him for as long as they wanted.

As an orderly pushed Ron's gurney down the hallway, a shocked Astoria turned to Daphne. "Ron Weasley is a Parselmouth? How is that possible?!"

"Personally," spoke Lucius Malfoy from behind them, "I would not consider it appropriate to even speculate on such sensitive matters. Especially when it involves an intimate secret of a family whose members just helped to save your lives." He gave the Greengrass sisters a firm glare. "No one appreciates idle gossip or those who spread it. Wouldn't you agree, young ladies?"

Both sisters nodded meekly. Then, Astoria looked past Malfoy and saw who was headed their way.

"Mother!" Both sisters ran past Lucius and into the embrace of Winnie Greengrass. There was another woman who came with Winnie, one who wore conspicuously Muggle attire. Tracey Davis darted past Lucius as well and into the woman's waiting arms. They hugged and spoke for a few minutes. Then, Tracey took the woman by the hand and, to Lucius's surprise, led her over.

"Mr. Malfoy, this is my mother, Sandra Davis. Mum, this is Lord Lucius Malfoy. He's the one who saved my life tonight."

Mrs. Davis seemed dazed by the news. "Thank you... Mr. Malfoy. I mean, Lord Malfoy, I suppose. Thank you so much." The Muggle woman wiped a tear away. "I... I don't know how I can repay you."

Lucius gave a respectful bow. "Mr. Malfoy is fine, Mrs. Davis. My Wizengamot title is meaningless in the Muggle world. And you owe me nothing. I did what... what any self-respecting wizard would have done when seeing someone's child in danger."

They spoke for a few moments more before Winnie came over and announced that they would be Apparating back to Greengrass Manor momentarily. She also thanked Lucius for looking after her daughters, and he accepted her gratitude with his usual grace. As Winnie led the Greengrasses and the Davises away, Sandra Davis was in the rear. The Muggle turned and looked back towards him.

"*Thank you*," she mouthed silently. He nodded curtly but said nothing more.

The Forest

Deeper into the woods, Harry, Amy, and the wounded Sirius were proceeding as fast as they could, and the boy could just make out the shimmer of the barrier some distance up ahead. He contemplated putting up another Fumos Maxima, but Amy wouldn't be able to see at all in the woods under cover of mist. So they moved as quickly as possible with Harry straining to hear any signs of Apparition with his heightened senses. And sure enough, he had barely enough time to cry out a warning after hearing a pop followed immediately by the clink of the crossbow firing. To Harry's surprise, the bolt went wide, missing the group by more than

ten feet to strike a tree. But surprise turned to horror when the tree did not vanish as before but instead blew up! The force of the explosion knocked the two children and their injured dog to the ground.

Instantly, Harry jumped back up and fired off several fireballs in Nott's direction. None of them hit the Death Eater, but they did start several fires in the area that gave off enough light for Harry to see. To his surprise, he could actually spot the man who was only half-invisible, as parts of his body could be seen through tears in the cloak. Before Harry could draw a bead, Nott Apparated again.

Instantly, Harry closed his eyes and dilated while simultaneously opening his Legilimency senses to their highest level. The pop of Apparition behind him sounded almost comically slow, but Harry knew its exact location. He whirled around even as Nott opened fire, but at this level of dilation, he could see the bolt coming with ease. Harry planted one leg behind him and leaned back as far as he could. The bolt flew past him, missing by inches. Simultaneously, Harry brought his own wand to bear and fired off an Expelliarmus before the shocked Death Eater could react. The spell struck home, and both the crossbow and Nott went flying. From her vantage point near Sirius, Amy pointed her own wand in that direction.

"ACCIO CROSSBOW!" In response, Nott's enchanted weapon flew towards her, even as Nott scrambled to duck and avoid the curses Harry sent his way.

But before Harry could press his advantage, his Legilimency warned him of an attack from a different direction. One of the Barghests had materialized in the clearing and was charging. Desperately, Harry threw himself to the side, but one of the beast's claws clipped his leg and he went down

painfully. Forcing himself up onto one knee, the boy closed his eyes and dilated once more, even as the Barghest blinked again to attack from a different direction. Focusing solely on the sounds made by the monstrous hound, Harry waited until the last second before twisting around to point his wand straight at the Barghest when it was almost close enough to bite.

"SSSECTUMSSSEMPRA!" he hissed. The force of the spell knocked Harry onto his back, even as waves of deadly magical force ripped the Barghest apart and splattered its remains across the clearing.

"SKÖLL!" Tiberius screamed. "YOU FILTHY LITTLE BASTARD!"

In a rage, he fired off several curses at Harry, but the boy cast a Protego just in time. Then, Amy tried to hit the Death Eater with a Stunner, but he ducked out of the way and returned fire.

"INCARCEROUS!"

The girl screamed as thick ropes appeared from nowhere to wrap her up tightly. A second spell also bound Sirius who had been struggling to his feet to charge Nott. Harry tried to curse the Death Eater, but he was behind cover. Then, to Harry's horror, Nott flicked his wand causing the bound Amy to rise up into the air until she was about thirty feet off the ground.

"THROW DOWN YOUR WAND, BOY!" Nott bellowed. "OR WE'LL SEE HOW HIGH I CAN MAKE THE LITTLE BITCH BOUNCE!"

"You won't do it!" Harry called out from behind his Protego. "You obviously need her alive for something!"

"Alive but not necessarily unharmed, Black! I assure you that we have no need for either her arms or her legs! Now toss away your wand!"

"Don't do it, Harry!" Amy yelled even as she tried unsuccessfully to keep the fear out of her voice. Below her, Padfoot struggled and whined ineffectually in his bounds.

Harry glared sullenly in Nott's direction and then tossed his wand to the ground, and a second later, he too was bound with an Incarcerous. As Amy was slowly lowered back to the ground, Nott finally stepped into view, bloodied but victorious. He limped over to Harry, idly summoning the boy's wand and stuffing it into his pocket.

"The beast you slew was named Sköll. She was a gift from Grindelwald to my father's father. She was... irreplaceable."

Harry sneered up at the man. "I'm so sorry for your loss," he said sarcastically.

Nott snorted once and then pointed his wand at the boy.

"**CRUCIO.** "

Harry Black writhed on the ground in agony. Behind them, Padfoot barked furiously while Amy screamed at Nott to stop. After three seconds of Cruciatus torture, the Death Eater released the spell. He looked down at the boy who he expected to be weeping and begging for mercy. But to his surprise, Harry Black looked up at him clear-eyed and with naked contempt.

"*I've had worse,*" he growled out in a rasping voice.

Surprised by that response, Nott actually took a step back. He was just about to Crucio the boy again when a flash of

movement from behind a nearby tree caught his attention, and he barely got a shield up in time to block a Lacero Curse aimed at his neck. Then, with a flick of Nott's wand, Harry's bound form was lifted up into the air so that the Death Eater could use him as a human shield.

"Too slow, whoever you are!" Nott snarled. "Now throw out your wand and show yourself! Before I see how the rest of Black's friends react to the Cruciatus!"

From behind a nearby tree, Theo closed his eyes in frustration that he hadn't been quick enough. He took several deep breaths to get his heartrate back under control and to reinforce his Occlumency. While he was nowhere near as good as Harry, Theo would need to remain calm and in control for what came next.

"Alright then, Lord Nott, " he thought to himself. "We'll do this the hard way ."

A second later, Theo's wand came sailing out from behind the tree to land at the Death Eater's feet. Then, Theo followed, his hands held a few feet from his body to show he was unarmed. Despite the circumstances, he appeared calm and even defiant.

"Ah! The No-Name brat!" Tiberius said with a laugh. "I was hoping it was you. Although I'm disappointed now that you surrendered so easily. You're a pitiful excuse for a wizard, but I'd have expected you to try something before just giving up your wand!"

Theo shrugged dismissively. "I don't need a wand to beat the likes of you."

The man snorted even as he dropped Harry to the ground in a heap. "No? Oh, of course! I've heard tales that you've been

a student of some silly foreign martial art. Is that how you're going to fight me?"

The boy shook his head. "It's called Wu Xi Do. And no, I don't need that to beat you either." By this point, he'd maneuvered to where he was about fifteen feet away from his former father, with the others behind the man, all bound and lying on the ground.

"All I need," Theo continued, "is the truth."

Tiberius laughed. "Truth? What truth? What craziness is this, boy?"

Theo called out to Harry but never took his gaze off of his former father. "Tell him, Harry. Tell him the truth about Tom Marvolo Riddle!"

"Uh, Theo?" Harry stammered in surprise.

"Tell. Him ."

Harry swallowed and recited the Secret that he'd learned from the Diary-Horcrux. "Tom Marvolo Riddle is the dark wizard known as Lord Voldemort."

Nott's head whipped down towards Harry in surprise, and then, he looked back and forth between Harry and Theo with an expression of almost comical confusion.

"Nonsense! That's... that's... !"

"That's the truth," Theo finished. "The absolute truth. That information was concealed inside a Fidelius. I've spent a lot of time studying that Charm over the last year or so. The Secret at the heart of a Fidelius must be completely true. If any important part of it is false or becomes false later, the

spell fails. But the reverse is also true. Once you learn the Secret from the Secret Keeper, you can't help but recognize the essential truth of it, no matter how much you wish to deny it. Lord Voldemort is actually a wizard named Tom Marvolo Riddle."

Theo smiled at the look of growing horror on Tiberius's face. "And you know that name too, I see. I'm sure your father must have mentioned him at some point given how much they hated each other at school. Tom Marvolo Riddle came to Hogwarts as an impoverished Muggleborn living in a Muggle orphanage. It wasn't until after his Fifth Year that Riddle learned that he was actually a Halfblood, the son of a Squib from the destitute and inbred House Gaunt... and a Muggle."

"N-no!" Nott stammered. "Th-that's... impossible!"

"Your father knew the truth even then," the boy continued relentlessly. "Cantankerous Nott Jr. openly mocked Riddle for presuming to claim the Gaunt Lord's ring despite his Muggle parentage. And that's why Riddle had your father killed!"

"LIES!" Nott bellowed while gripping his wand so tightly that his knuckles were turning white. "It was Mudblood filth who murdered my father!"

"On Tom Riddle's orders!" Theo interrupted. "Your father was a genealogy expert who also knew Tom Riddle personally. He was the person most likely to pierce the Secret of Voldemort's fake identity despite the Fidelius. And so Riddle had him killed. Which also allowed you to become the new Lord Nott just in time to swear loyalty to your own father's murderer and to deliver all your family's wealth to his cause!"

"SHUT UP! SHUT UP! NONE OF THIS MATTERS!"

Theo sneered. "No! Of course it doesn't matter! Because you don't really care about all that Pureblood bullshit anyway! You follow Voldemort because you're a twisted sadist and you think Voldemort will build a future where you can go back to killing Muggles for fun. And that's why if the Halfblood Dark Lord Tom Riddle returns, you will be the first to drop to your knees and kiss his feet!"

"I SAID SHUT UP!"

"Although," Theo continued almost sweetly. "I suspect you might have to shove your wife, the half-Veela Narcissa Black Nott, out of the way first. I imagine she'll be on her knees before that Halfblood pretender for a *different* reason."

And with that, Theo practically leered at his ex-father. Nott stared at the boy in confusion for several seconds before he finally realized what Theo was insinuating about his beloved wife. And then, his face turned purple with pure, unfiltered rage as he raised his wand.

"*CRUCIO* !" Nott screamed.

In the distance, fires and screams from the campsite could still be heard, but the clearing was silent save for the deep gasping breaths of Tiberius Nott. Theo crooked an eyebrow at the man who could only look back and forth stupidly between the wand in his hand and the son he'd cast aside.

"I realize, of course, that I'm not as knowledgeable about wizarding law as your solicitor, Mr. Renwick," he said. "But... I *do believe* that was an attempt to harm me with magic. Something you swore *two* Unbreakable Vows never to do!"

Nott's confused expression changed to one of abject horror, and he began desperately flicking his wand trying to provoke a response from it.

"LUMOS! L-LUMOS! LUUUMMOOOS!" Then, in a moment of hysterical madness, he pointed the wand at Theo again. "AVAAADAA KEDAAVRAAAAA!"

And the whole time, Theo just laughed and laughed at the Death Eater's distress.

"I guess it's a good thing after all that Voldemort is actually a Halfblood pretender! Maybe that means he'll be openminded about having a Squib in his Inner Circle!"

That comment finally drove Tiberius Nott around the bend. "I'LL KILL YOU!" he screamed. He threw the useless wand aside and pulled out a hunting knife before charging towards Theo.

Theo sniffed disdainfully before shifting his right leg back behind his left and centering his weight between them. Simultaneously, he brought both fists up even with his chin, pausing only long enough to flick the tip of his nose twice with his right thumb. When Nott was close enough to stab at him with the knife, Theo dropped to one knee. And as the knife slashed the empty air over his head, Theo No-Name punched his right fist as hard as he could into Tiberius Nott's crotch. The knife went flying, and the Death Eater let out a disturbingly high-pitched squeal before slumping to the ground and collapsing into a fetal position as tears poured down his face.

Theo rose and calmly regarded the man who'd murdered his mother and made his life a living hell.

"Millicent Bulstrode was right," he said evenly. "Sometimes, Muggle ways are the best."

The boy bent over to retrieve Harry's wand from Nott's pocket. Then, he leaned in close, and his aloof, sarcastic

mask melted away to reveal *savage* pleasure at how he'd beaten the man.

"By the way, Father," he whispered, "it turns out that... *I can control your Barghests* ."

Despite his pain, Nott's eyes widened in shock.

"Yes, Father. Despite the disownment, the Ultimate Sanction, and both our hopes and dreams, Magic still considers me your son, a fact that makes me want to vomit. Luckily, you've lost your magic, which means that soon, Alex and I will both be *orphans* . Now, I don't know how much time you have left, but it really doesn't matter. The truth is... you were *already dead* the moment my mother hit the bottom of the stairs. You just didn't know it yet."

Without another word, Theo No-Name rose and walked around Tiberius Nott to retrieve his own wand from where it had landed. Seconds later, all his friends were freed from their bindings. For good measure, Theo placed the still moaning Nott under an Incarcerous, while Amy recovered the crossbow and handed it to him.

"To the victor go the spoils, and all that," she said with a smirk.

"What should we do with him?" Harry asked while pointing to the bound Nott. "He can't share Riddle's Secret, but he can probably reveal that we know it. And probably that I'm a Parselmouth."

Before Theo could answer, there was another pop from the far side of the clearing. Theo turned to look and saw the faint outline of the other Barghest.

"We should go now," he said quietly. "Don't worry about Tiberius. He won't be a problem anymore."

With that, Theo ushered the group on into the forest towards the barrier. Meanwhile, Nott looked around wildly at the sound of Hati's growling.

"HATI!" the man gasped out despite his continued pain.
"AFTER THEM! KILL THEM ALL!"

The only response was a deep hungry growl that slowly advanced towards the bound Death Eater.

"HATI! O-OBEY ME! GET AFTER THEM! I... I COMMAND IT!"

The only response was a vicious snarl now only a few yards away. And only then, did Tiberius Nott remember. The Barghests were trained to recognize and obey the magic of House Nott. But now, Tiberius no longer had any such magic. And through three generations of careful training by Tiberius and his forefathers, the Barghests were taught to kill on sight any Muggles or Squibs they encountered.

Theo and the others had only just reached the barrier when the man's terrible screams were abruptly cut off.

Meanwhile...

Back in the campsite, Mr. January raised his wand-*walnut and dragon heartstring* -to fire a spell towards a nearby tent. Then, he pointed it up towards the heavens and whispered a single word.

"MORSMORDRE. "

In his off hand, he held a second wand-*ash and phoenix feather*-which had already been used once to cast that same dark spell.

The wreckage of Barty Crouch's tent...

"Weasley! Weasley! Percy!" cried out a familiar voice that caused the young man's eyes to flutter open. Percy shook his head and tried to sit up only to find himself pinned beneath a pile of office furniture. He'd nodded off for a quick catnap at his desk only to be jolted awake when the entire Expanded Tent shrank down to its normal size.

"Help!" he cried out. "I'm over here!"

"Hang on!" said the other man, who Percy now recognized as Director Crouch himself. The man staggered into view, his clothes disheveled. With a gesture of his wand, the furniture flew off of Percy.

"Are you alright, lad?"

Percy pulled himself up from the floor. "I think so, sir," he coughed. "Bruised but nothing serious. What happened?!"

"No idea, except to say that some curse struck the tent and caused the Spatial Expansion Charms to fail. We're lucky we weren't crushed." Crouch paused. "Winky! Winky! Where are you?! Winky!"

"Perhaps she went to get help," Percy said.

"Perhaps. Let's get the hell out of here and find out what in blazes is going on!"

Percy followed his boss out of the ruined tent only to freeze in horror at the image hanging in the sky.

The Australian Sector

Nearby, Delphini White was beginning to wish she'd kept her wand and simply rendered the British Aurors unconscious, diplomatic consequences be damned. It didn't help her mood to realize that the Ministry official interrogating her quite rudely for her actions was someone she knew perfectly well was a Death Eater.

"Look, *Mr. Yucky*, or whatever your name is... !"

"Yaxley!" the angry man interrupted.

"Whatever," Delphini snapped. "If you don't believe us, wake up McAvity! He can confirm what we said. Or at the very least, find out who these masked men are who were attempting to kidnap the man! Or are you admitting that they really are British Aurors sent to do something nefarious to one of our officials?!"

Yaxley's angry retort was cut off when a blast of green light shot from a position not far away. It flew up into the sky to the heart of the magical lattice and destroyed it. But the destruction of the barrier was not met with cheers of relief but rather by even more terror. In its place, there was now a glowing green symbol that lit up the night sky, the same one that had lit up the skies over the Devil's Tor, though no outsiders were on hand to witness that manifestation. Here, however, thousands gazed up in terrified fascination at the Dark Mark that served as the calling card for Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

Seemingly in response to the Mark's appearance, there were loud pops all around the campsite as the attacking forces—whether they appeared to be Australian hooligans or Death Eaters, whether they were alive, dead, or somewhere in between—all vanished simultaneously. Among their number were the three unconscious "Aurors" who had been manhandling Alexander McAvity.

The Ministry personnel who had accompanied Yaxley looked around wildly in panic at the Dark Mark's appearance. Even Delphini suppressed a shudder at the terrible sight, for it now meant something quite different to her than it had before her true personality was restored. Only Yaxley looked up at the glowing green skull without fear or even surprise, a fact that Delphini quietly noted.

Yaxley looked back to Delphini and Bill as if searching for a way to blame them for the Dark Mark even though they were wandless. Before he could speak a word, the group was distracted by a small bonfire erupting out of nowhere. Then flames vanished quickly to reveal the surprising and welcome presence of Albus Dumbledore standing tall and proud with Fawkes on his shoulder. The old wizard took but a moment to assess the situation and then raise his wand aloft.

"MERGIT FLAMMARUM MAXIMA!"

A wave of magical energy swept across the entire campsite, and all the fires that had been set by the attackers were instantly snuffed out.

"Dumbledore!" Yaxley snapped. "What are you doing here?"

"Not as much as I could have had I arrived earlier, I fear," the Headmaster said ruefully. "I received a Patronus message from young Neville Longbottom alerting me that the

Quidditch World Cup was under attack by Death Eaters. I came as soon as I could."

Dumbledore looked up to the Dark Mark hanging in the sky, and his expression darkened. Over the next several minutes, the old wizard completed a series of complex gestures meant to dispel the ghastly image.

"Now, what has been happening here?" he said over his shoulder while he worked to undo the Dark Mark. "And why in Merlin's name are you all standing around the unconscious body of an important foreign dignitary without rendering him any aid?"

"Well don't blame me?" Delphini said petulantly. "Director Yak's Breath threatened to hex us both if we didn't drop our wands."

Ignoring Yaxley's furious sputtering, Delphini bent down to retrieve her wand and promptly cast a Renervate on McAvity. Bill helped the groggy man to his feet.

"There were no Death Eaters, Dumbledore!" Yaxley spat. "Everything we have seen so far indicates that it was a bunch of Australian hooligans cheaply disguised as Death Eaters. Probably as part of some scheme cooked up by the Dark Lord McAvity here!"

At that, the normally unflappable McAvity finally lost his temper.

"How dare you, Yaxley! How *fucking dare you* try to blame me for this chaos when it was British Aurors who attacked my tent, injured or killed several of my staff, and dragged me away with threats to execute me! Had it not been for these two young people, I'd be dead by now!"

"Enough!" Dumbledore said authoritatively. "Alexander, I find it difficult to believe that the British Ministry would be involved in a scheme to assassinate you. Certainly not under these bizarre circumstances. Likewise, Director Yaxley, I find it equally difficult to believe that Australian Quidditch hooligans would be able to convincingly recreate the Dark Mark, a spell with which I am *quite* familiar. Obviously, more is going on here than is apparent. Might I suggest we focus on tending to the injured while also investigating the origin of the Dark Mark that we all just witnessed?"

"I'm pretty sure it came from over that way, Headmaster," said Bill helpfully.

"Well spotted, William," the old wizard said. With a final flourish of Dumbledore's wand, the Dark Mark faded away, and he turned to face the others. "Lead on. Director Yaxley, might I suggest you contact St. Mungo's and arrange transport for the injured now that the anti-Apparition and anti-Portkey jinxes have been undone?"

"You're not my boss, Dumbledore," Yaxley said angrily.

"Of course not, dear boy," Dumbledore replied, completely ignoring the man's attitude. "That was why I phrased it as a reasonable suggestion that any sensible man would follow instead of as a direct order."

Yaxley glared at the Chief Warlock for a few seconds before he turned and began barking out orders to the DMLE personnel who accompanied him. In the meantime, a contingent of Australian Aurors led by Buck MacMillan arrived. After conferring with McAvity, they offered their services as battlefield medics, though Buck himself insisted on staying close to McAvity, who Yaxley still seemed eager to arrest on whatever charges seemed the most plausible.

St. Mungo's

Ron's eyes fluttered open, and he raised his head to look around. He was lying in a bed in a private hospital room with most of his family present. Molly and Arthur stood to his left, looking pensive but still overjoyed to see him awake. Behind them, he could see Charlie, who was sleeping peacefully in another bed. Ginny and the Twins were at the foot of the bed. Only Bill and Percy were absent.

To Ron's right stood three Healers who introduced themselves as Healers Crenshaw, Chang, and Dagworth-Granger.

Healer Crenshaw was the first to speak. "How are you feeling, Mr. Weasley?"

"Fine," the boy said nervously. "And please, call me Ron."

"I'm glad to hear that, Ron. I'm the Chief of Pediatric Medicine here at St. Mungo's. Healer Chang is Chief of the Emergency Ward, while Healer Dagworth-Granger works in the Spell Damage Ward. We'd like to ask you a few questions about exactly what you did for your brother."

"Is Charlie going to be okay?" Ron asked suddenly.

"Your brother is fine, Ron," said Healer Chang. "Remarkably so, considering the severity of his injuries. That you could heal him so quickly-and through the use of what seems to be Parseltongue-is astonishing. However did you acquire that gift at such a young age?"

"You don't have to answer that," said Ginny from the foot of the bed. Everyone turned to look at the young girl in surprise. She just turned to Healer Crenshaw. "That's right,

isn't it? He's a minor and his parents are here, so he can't be interrogated without permission, correct?"

Crenshaw looked taken aback but then smiled. "That's correct, young lady. But I promise you, this is not an 'interrogation.' And before we go any further, I want to assure you all that all of the hospital personnel who witnessed Ron's amazing feat have sworn a Healer's Oath not to reveal it. Nor will we reveal anything Ron tells us without his consent or that of your parents."

"To be honest, Ron," said Dagworth-Granger. "I'm a bit jealous. I undertook a study of Parseltongue many years ago in hopes of learning to use it in healing magic, but I didn't last a month!"

Ron winced, as his method for learning the skill suddenly felt like cheating. "If it's all the same, I'd rather not talk about how I learned it right now. Not until after I've talked with my Mum and Dad."

"That's perfectly understandable," said Crenshaw. "Would you feel more comfortable just telling us what spells you used?"

The boy looked bashfully up at his parents, who were supportive but didn't seem to know what to say. Then, to his own surprise, he looked at Ginny, who gave a slight shrug as if to say "*That's probably okay*."

"Um, I used a couple of Episkeys, but they weren't getting the job done, so I switched to Vulnera Sanatur. About three of those were enough to heal his... well, his insides, I guess. I tried to do a Brackium Emendo but couldn't figure out how to say it on account of it not having any S's. Oh, and I started with a Samsara just to get his heart going while I did the other stuff."

The Healers looked at one another in amazement. But before they could ask any more questions, a Mediwitch came in with a chart for Healer Chang that caused him to blanch. Meanwhile, Crenshaw continued with his questions.

"How do you feel now, Ron? And do you know what caused you to pass out?"

"I feel fine. I just needed a nap, I guess. It's the Samsara that always does me in."

"Always?" Dagworth-Granger said in amazement. "That's an incredibly difficult spell! And dangerous too! How many times have you used it and incorporated Parseltongue?"

Ron blushed. "I used it a few times helping with Healer Gupta when I spent the summer in Shamballa, but he told me never to use it with Parseltongue. But, well... tonight was the third time I did it that way. At least this time, I managed to catch myself before I overdid it."

"Ronald!" exclaimed Molly.

"It was an emergency, Mum!" the boy interrupted. "Charlie was dying! I couldn't just sit there and do nothing!"

"Shh! It's alright, Ronnie," said Arthur as he put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Okay, Ron," Chang asked. "Do you mean to say that using Samsara is the only reason you passed out? That you can cast Vulnera Sanatur with Parseltongue safely?"

He shrugged. "I think so."

"Why are you asking, Healer Chang?" asked Arthur.

The three Healers looked to one another with an anxious expression.

"Because the first wave of casualties from the attack on the Quidditch World Cup are about to arrive shortly," he said gravely. "It's bad, Mr. Weasley. Very bad. And... we were hoping we could prevail upon your son to, well, work a few more miracles for us."

Back at the campsite...

Unaware of the drama unfolding around his youngest brother, Bill Weasley led Dumbledore and the Aurors to what he believed was the source of the Dark Mark. It had emanated from somewhere in the British Sector. Along the way, they picked up other Ministry personnel: Barty Crouch, Percy Weasley, Ludo Bagman, and Amos Diggory, as well as Diggory's son, who seemed quite shaken for someone with no visible injuries. For his part, Amos seemed surprised to see Percy and Bill.

"I say, you're two of Arthur's boys, aren't you? Why aren't you at St. Mungo's?"

The two looked at one another in confusion.

"My injuries aren't severe, Mr. Diggory," said Percy. "And I'm happy to stay here and assist Mr. Crouch."

"Oh, dear! You haven't heard!" Amos said with an ashen expression. Beside him, Cedric suddenly looked ill.

"Heard what?" Bill asked, his eyes narrowing.

"It's your brother Charlie," said Cedric. He glanced over at Amos who stared at him intensely. "He took a curse from..."

from whoever it was that attacked us." The boy swallowed painfully. "I'm sorry, Bill, but... it didn't look good."

Bill and Percy both went pale at the news. Barty put his hand on Percy's shoulder.

"I think you two should go to St. Mungo's and be with your family. Albus, would you be so good as to fashion a Portkey?"

"I don't think even Albus Dumbledore has the authority to create Portkeys at will, Crouch," Yaxley snapped.

"Well then," Barty replied bitingly. "It's a good thing I have the legal authority to authorize emergency Portkeys as needed!"

Moments later, the two Weasley sons departed, and the others continued on towards the origin point for the Dark Mark, which, to everyone's surprise, was quite near the wreckage of Barty Crouch's tent. The older wizard frowned in consternation.

"I'll wager the same person who attacked Weasley and myself was also the blighter who cast the Dark Mark."

"Over here!" called out Yaxley. "I found someone! Well, something!"

The DMLE Director emerged from the shadows cradling a small form in his arms. "It's a house elf!"

"Ahh!" Crouch cried out in distress. "Winky! What's happened to her?!"

"She appears to have been stunned, Director Crouch," Yaxley said while laying Winky down gently. Then, he took a closer look. The elf wore her usual attire: a smock bearing the crest

of House Crouch over a simple dress. And the smock had one large pocket out of which something was sticking. Yaxley reached in to remove the object and held it up so the others could see. It was a wand.

"Hey! That's mine!" cried Jim Potter, who was running up to the scene along with his parents. Yaxley frowned at James Potter's presence but said nothing about it. Instead, he turned to the Boy-Who-Lived.

"You are certain this is your wand, Jim?" he asked.

Jim grimaced slightly at the thought of a marked Death Eater calling him by his first name. "Yes, absolutely." But when he reached out for it, Yaxley demurred.

"Not just yet, Jim. This wand was found at a crime scene after all." Then, to the surprise of all the Potters, Yaxley turned to Dumbledore. "Chief Warlock, normally I would have an Auror handle this, but given the... sensitivity of the parties involved, would you consent to performing the *Priori Incantato*?"

Dumbledore crooked a suspicious eyebrow but took the wand anyway and cast the Charm to reveal what spells it had been used to cast. Immediately, a much smaller version of the Dark Mark appeared over it, and the word "*Morsmordre*" seemed to whisper from the ash wand.

"So the wand of the Boy-Who-Lived was used to summon the Dark Mark!" Amos Diggory gasped.

Barty Crouch nodded grimly. "I'll wager that's why someone cursed my tent to collapse, almost crushing Percy Weasley and myself! Only then was young Potter's wand used to summon the Dark Mark. Presumably, the attacker feared

that I might have recognized the incantation Morsmordre and come out to catch him or her in the act."

Crouch slashed his wand angrily in the direction of the tiny skull floating above Jim's wand, and it dissipated instantly.

Dumbledore addressed Yaxley. "I can confirm that other than that one spell, this wand has not been used to perform magic within at least the last several days. That is as far back as even my Priori Incantato can reveal. Do you think the wand has any other evidentiary value, Corban? Or can we return it at last to its true owner?"

"By all means, Dumbledore," said Yaxley dismissively. "But now, perhaps we should hear from Crouch's elf and find out how it came into her possession. If you would please, Diggory? Beasts and whatnot are your forte."

Dumbledore handed the wand off to a grateful and relieved Jim Potter while Amos Diggory stepped forward with his wand raised. While casting the spell to awaken the house elf, he glanced over at Crouch, who looked concerned.

"Bad business this, Barty. An elf with a wand. That's clause three of the Code of Wand Use broken, for a start. *No non-human creature is permitted to carry or use a wand.*"

"Is this really the time, Diggory?" Crouch said with a glare.

"The law is the law, Crouch," Amos said imperiously before turning back to Winky. "**RENEUVATE** !"

Winky slowly came to her senses and then looked around in confusion. When she made eye contact with Barty Crouch, her eyes began to water.

"Elf!" said Mr. Diggory sternly. "Do you know who I am? I'm a member of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures!"

The elf began to tremble as Diggory continued.

"The Dark Mark was conjured from this location a short while ago. And you were discovered moments later, right beneath it! An explanation, if you please!"

"I-I-I is not doing it, sir!" Winky gasped. "I is not knowing how, sir!"

"Honestly, Amos," said Dumbledore rather curtly, "the idea that a house elf could have cast the Dark Mark is preposterous. It is obvious that she merely found the wand where the one responsible dropped it."

"And by '*the one responsible*,' we're obviously talking about Australian insurgents!" Yaxley declared. "We've established that it was Australians who stole the wand of the Boy-Who-Lived in the first place, after all!"

"You have established no such thing!" McAvity snapped. "I have already told you that the Australian sector was thoroughly searched. There were no signs of Mr. Potter's missing wand nor any signs of persons wearing fake Death Eater costumes! And honestly man! *Insurgents*?! That's paranoid nonsense!"

"Be that as it may, McAvity, I believe there is enough evidence to take you into custody immediately. Hit Wizards, arrest that man!"

The three startled Hit Wizards who'd accompanied Yaxley to this location looked at one another in surprise before pointing their wands at McAvity. In response, Buck, Delphini,

and the Australian Aurors who'd come along drew their own wands. Violence seemed imminent when Dumbledore called out.

"Enough! All of you! Director Yaxley be reasonable! Aside from the fact that you have only the barest circumstantial evidence, I remind you that Director McAvity is here not just as an Australian but as an ICW official! He has diplomatic immunity!"

"Which does not extend to crimes of this magnitude, Dumbledore. At a minimum, McAvity is a material witness on the matter of exactly what led to this attack!"

"And I am willing to give a statement," McAvity said hotly. "But not under duress! And I will not submit myself to detainment by the British Ministry after three wizards attired as British Aurors attacked my staff and attempted to kidnap me!"

"Well, I'll tell you one thing," Yaxley replied. "You will not be leaving British soil until this situation is resolved to my satisfaction!"

McAvity stared at Yaxley balefully. Then, to everyone's surprise, he smiled. "Well then, my good man. How about a compromise! I love compromises! They make me feel like I learned something in Sunday School!"

And while the Purebloods present tried to figure out what '*Sunday School*' was, McAvity turned to Dumbledore.

"Headmaster, I regret I couldn't find the time to avail myself of your invitation to visit you at Hogwarts. Is the offer still open?"

Dumbledore looked at him in surprise. "Of course, Alexander. You are always welcome at Hogwarts."

"Well then!" McAvity said jovially. "That settles it! Supreme Mugwump, as Junior Mugwump of the sovereign state of the Magical Commonwealth of Australia, I hereby remand myself to your custody and claim asylum at Hogwarts until... well, until the British government pulls its collective head from its arse! You can put me up in one of the towers you're not using! Like Richard III and the two princes!"

"Albus... !" Crouch began warningly.

"Barty," Albus said with a sigh. "You know the international law that is applicable here. Hogwarts technically exists outside the government of Wizarding Britain and functions as a semi-autonomous region. As Supreme Mugwump and Headmaster, I am bound both by the ICW bylaws and the Hogwarts charter to provide sanctuary to Alexander until a diplomatic solution can be found."

"But you're not at Hogwarts now!" Amos exclaimed.

"True!" McAvity said. "But I'm also not under an anti-Apparition jinx!"

And then, before anyone could react, the Dark Lord McAvity turned on his heels and Apparated away, presumably to sanctuary at Hogwarts.

"Dammit, Albus!" Crouch roared.

"Barty, Corban, look at it this way. By allowing Alexander to stay at Hogwarts, I will be responsible for both his safety and his security. I will make sure he's available for any interviews, and I can do so without causing an international incident that will greatly damage our standing before the ICW."

Then, Dumbledore paused and looked around the ruins of the Quidditch World Cup. "Well, *more* of an international incident."

"Fine," said Yaxley in a gruff voice. "I'll hold you to that Dumbledore. But in the meantime, there's still the matter of Crouch's elf!"

"Eh?" Crouch looked at the man crossly. "What about my elf? We've established that Winky wasn't responsible for the Dark Mark!"

"True," Yaxley said with a smarmy expression. "But she was caught with a wand on her person! I believe the law is quite clear on that, is it not, Diggory?"

"Oh yes, Director Yaxley," Amos replied. "Quite clear. It doesn't matter whether she used young Potter's wand or not. She held it! That is a violation of the law for which there is only one acceptable punishment! *Clothes* !"

Jim gasped. "But that's not fair! Winky didn't do anything!"

"The law is the law, Mr. Potter," Amos said piously.

Crouch looked at the man with contempt. "And we all know that your only concern lies in making sure the law is obeyed, don't we, Amos. I'm sure it has nothing to do with your bitterness over my claiming the Directorship of the DoIMC which you were expecting to get for yourself!"

Amos blushed but did not rise to the bait. Beside him, Cedric looked away while wishing he could sink into the earth.

With a sigh, Crouch knelt down close to the elf who was weeping piteously. "I am sorry that I must do this, Winky. You have served me and my family faithfully for many years. But

I have no choice. By taking that wand, even for an innocent purpose, you have violated the law. And as punishment, I must give you clothes."

At that, Winky began to cry even harder. Crouch looked up at Dumbledore.

"Albus, is it still Hogwarts policy to accept house elves who have been freed by their masters?"

"Of course, Barty. Winky will be welcome among the elves of Hogwarts."

"Good. Then seeing as how my tent is destroyed, I shall take Winky home for tonight. You may expect her at Hogwarts tomorrow."

He gently picked up the distraught elf and, after glaring at Yaxley and Diggory for a moment, Crouch Apparated away.

At that point, Jim Potter spoke up. "Um, excuse me? But does anyone know where any of the Weasleys got off to? I wanted to make sure they were okay."

In response, a somber Albus Dumbledore informed the boy of Charlie Weasley's serious injuries and that the whole family was at St. Mungo's. Lily agreed to take the horrified boy to the hospital to be with his friend, while James remained at the campsite on Yaxley's orders to help with cleanup. But he did take the opportunity for one quick side trip. After leaving Yaxley's sight, James ducked into a secluded alleyway between two damaged tents before Apparating into the arena. Upon arriving, he looked up to the top of the display pedestal.

The Goblet of Fire was exactly where he'd last seen it, still lit and apparently untouched. James cast a few spells to

confirm that the wards around the Goblet were in perfect working order. Finding no gaps in the defenses, he shrugged and Apparated away.

The Car Park

After what seemed like an eternity, all of Harry's friends rendezvoused at Dan's SUV. Along the way, Archie found Neville still barricaded inside a magical hedge barrier which was quickly dispatched. Luckily for all concerned, the werewolf claw marks that Archie had taken were not to his wand arm, and he was able to heal Neville's broken legs after several tries. A bigger concern for Neville was the sight of Hermione, who Dan was carrying in his arms and who seemed to be in a state of shock. Soon after, they finally made their way to the SUV to find Harry, Theo, Amy, and Padfoot waiting for them.

With surprising professionalism and detachment, Dan went immediately to the emergency medical bag he kept in the back of the SUV for emergencies. After giving his daughter a firm hug, he set to work on Padfoot in an effort to remove the orichalcum bolt tip from the dog's shoulder so that the man could finally and safely resume his human form. Archie stood over him providing light with a Lumos.

"I would not have thought this a normal part of dentistry, Dan," Archie said cautiously.

"And it's not," Dan replied. "Luckily, I'm an oral surgeon as well. I just leave that bit out of the job description when talking to wizards. You lot barely know what dentistry is, after all."

"Touché," said Archie.

Neville was asleep in the back of the SUV. While his legs were mostly healed, it had taken repeated Brackium Emendos from Archie, and the spell incorporated a pain-relieving effect which got stronger the more times it was used. So once he made it back to the SUV, the boy was happy to lay down for a nap. Harry was also asleep in the back of the SUV, though not by choice. Upon learning that Harry had been struck by a Cruciatus from Tiberius Nott (and then hearing Harry say that he was "fine" despite a few obvious body tremors), Archie promptly shot the boy in the back with a Somnium until they could get him proper treatment. Amy stayed close to Dan and Archie, watching the impromptu veterinary surgery with fascination. Theo and Hermione sat on the ground with their backs against the other side of the vehicle.

Theo looked at the girl cautiously. "Are you okay?" he asked gently.

Hermione nodded slowly. "I just... I killed someone tonight," she said in a quiet voice.

He took a deep breath. "Me too."

The witch's head jerked around in surprise. "Oh?"

"Tiberius Nott. He was torturing Harry and was about to-I dunno-either kill them or kidnap them so he could kill them later. You?"

"It was a werewolf. He was about to kill my father."

Theo's eyes widened.

"Do you... feel bad about it?" he asked.

Hermione looked away. "I'm still not sure. A little? Honestly, right now, I mostly feel bad about the fact that I don't feel as bad as I think I should. Does that make sense?"

Theo blinked as he worked his way through that rather complex sentence. Then, he nodded. "Yeah, it makes total sense. I know exactly what you mean."

They were silent for a moment. Nearby, they could hear Neville snoring softly.

"If you don't mind telling," Theo asked, "how did you manage to kill a werewolf?"

"Sectumsempra. It's for... well... killing werewolves."

"Good choice then, I reckon."

"And if you don't mind me asking... how did you kill Lord Nott?"

Theo turned to look into his friend's eyes. "Believe it or not- and I'm still not sure if I believe it- I killed him with a tasteless joke about his wife giving oral pleasure to You-Know-Who."

Hermione's eyes widened as if she were more scandalized by the method of killing than the fact of it. Then, the witch and the wizard both started laughing at the absurdity of it all.

St. Mungo's

When Jim finally made it to St. Mungo's with Lily close behind, the first Weasley he saw was Fred who was just coming out of a men's restroom.

"Fred! Where's Ron?"

Surprised by the other boy's presence, Fred pointed down the hallway. "In the Emergency Surgery Room. He's been in there for a while now."

Jim's eyes widened in horror at the thought of his best mate being injured somehow after he'd impulsively run off to rescue someone else. Without another word, he ran down the hall with Fred and Lily calling after him. Then, he skidded to a stop next to a window into the ward. Ron was indeed in the Emergency Surgery Room. He just wasn't there as a patient. Instead, to Jim's surprise, he was performing Parselmouth surgery on a wounded man under the supervision of trained Healers. Jim could hear Ron's hissing through the glass.

"... The hell?" Jim said to no one in particular.

Assorted Headlines from the next morning's Daily Prophet...

Chaos at Quidditch World Cup!

Historic Irish Victory Over Bulgaria

Overshadowed By Unprecedented Violence!

Dark Mark? Or Dark Hoax!

Australian Muggleborns Attack QWC

Dressed as Death Eaters! Allied With Werewolves!

Bartemius Crouch Nearly Assassinated!

Was Rogue House Elf Involved?

Dark Lord McAvity Claims Sanctuary at Hogwarts!

Has Dumbledore Finally Gone Mad?

Unidentified Parselmouth Performs Medical

Miracles! Saves Dozens of QWC Victims!

Who Is The Parselmouth Prodigy?

Severed Head of Retired Hit Wizard Durwood

Gibbon Found Amongst the Wreckage!

Amos Diggory of DRCMC Denies Reports

Of Barghests Used During Attack!

Are Followers of Grindelwald Involved?

Lady Narcissa Nott Reports Lord Nott III With

Severe Spattergroit! Appoints Wife As Regent!

Somewhere in Britain beneath a Fidelius...

"Well, so far, at least," said Peter Pettigrew as he thumbed through the Prophet, "it looks like everything's gone perfectly. Don't you agree, old bean?"

"Hmm," replied Augustus Rookwood as he buttered a scone. "There was that bit where Tiberius Nott managed to get himself killed and eaten by one of his own Hellhounds."

Peter snorted. "You're right. Everything's gone better than perfect."

They both laughed.

End of Part 1: The Games of Summer

To be continued in

Harry Black and the Resurrection Game

Part 2: The Trials of Winter

Beginning July 1, 2021

Next: Three straight weeks of working on Strangers In Dallas. Then, I get back to POS and hopefully get the kids on the train at last.

AN1: Check out the Sinister Man's web presence on the POS wiki, the POS TV Tropes page, and my Discord server (through which you can see advance previews of this story as it is begin written). Also, the Sinister Man would be profoundly grateful if you checked out my P*n page and supported my original fiction. Patronage is not necessary to get the free POS previews via Discord.

AN2: What the Sinister Man is reading:

Forgotten, but not gone by jelena Russo (AO3). Hermione Granger, the Mudblood Who Lived, grows up impoverished in an orphanage until she's rescued by her Hogwarts letter... and is promptly sorted into Slytherin.

Do you still believe [in one another] by petroltogo. An intriguing take on the WBWL. Early in Year 3, Adrian Potter realizes that his twin, Harry, is the real BWL based on

memories recovered from Dementor exposure. He decides to keep the knowledge to himself, not for selfish reasons, but because he loves his brother (despite him being a Slytherin) and genuinely wants to protect Harry from Voldemort and the Death Eaters.

AN3: Special thanks to my Discord editors: _Paryanoia, Absolutely Fine, AjithSen, Banshee, BlueWater5, Bob, CitoyenneClark, EN, Erritiguei1, HeidiWolf, justanother random human, kean, Krisni, Kylemagne, LFGB, Mr. Cato, Nemo's Flower Song, ohana, PrettyPinkCupcake, ProgKingHughesker, Rubric of Ahriman, thebluesky, and Twice the Jo. Thanks, guys.

AN4: Vital Statistics: Reviews: 17,035. Followers: 17,869. Favorites: 16,131. Communities: 243. Discord followers: 4,450! Go Team POS!
